Mondaiji-tachi ga iseki kara kuru soudesu yo Volume 05

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降臨、蒼海の覇者
Tatsunokotarou
竜ノ湖太郎
illustration
天之有
問題児たちが異世界から来るそうですよ？
角川スニーカー文庫


ペスト
……斑模様でも、黒死病にかかりませんよー
レース観戦のお供に"斑梨"のジュースはいかがですかー？
レティシア
リリ

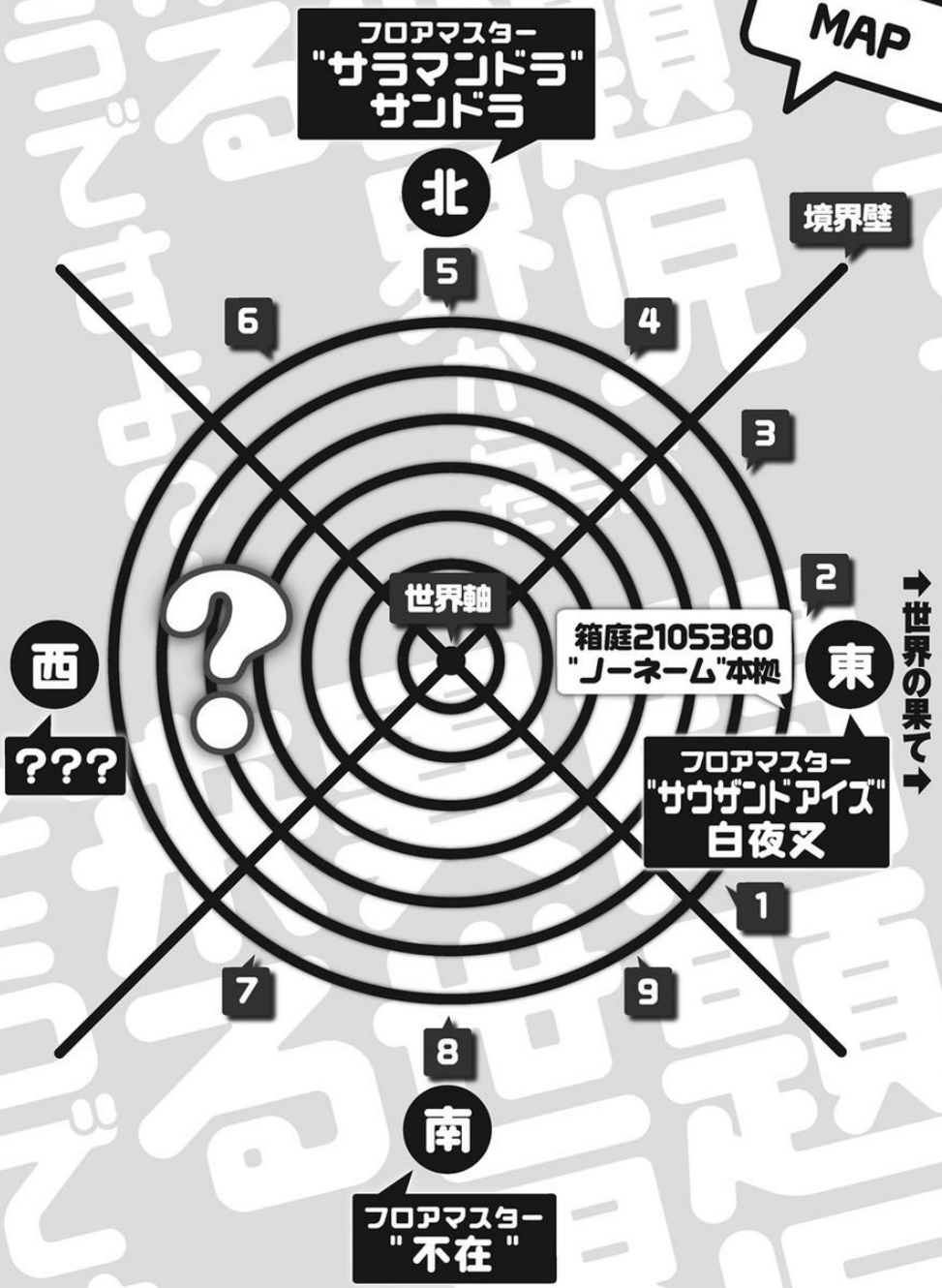

春日部耀
黒ウサギ
久遠飛鳥
ゲーム開始前に、まず一言。黒ウサギは、実にエロいな！
さっさと開始してくださいこのお馬鹿ッ!!
――というわけでッ！収穫祭のメインゲーム〝ヒッポカンプの騎手〟は、全員の水着着用を義務とするッ!!!


ええんか？
僕が出場したら、
ゲームそのものが滅茶苦茶になるで？
こうまおう
蛟魔王
しろやしゃ
白夜叉



口絵・本文イラスト／天之有
口絵・本文デザイン／百足屋ユウコ（ムシカゴグラフィクス）

MAP



Character





Prologue

Part 1

----Outer Gate number 2105380, [No Name] Community, Residential Area

The pleasant golden hue of sunlight filtered into the room as Leticia, in her maid outfit, sat beside the window tying her braids. Placing her comb on the dressing table, she contemplated over the reflection of herself in the mirror.

"……I guess I'm good to go. I'm also getting more comfortable with this maid outfit too."

Leticia swayed her head from left to right to check her hair for a final time, causing her silky golden hair to glitter as they catch the sunlight.

She seemed like a twelve year old in a clean and neatly worn maid outfit. Although cute flowery frills that line the hems were of no practical use nor did it comply with the idea of a proper maid attire, it looked very charming on her. And that could only be the materialization of her master's fetish.

Leticia stood with arms akimbo, staring at the completion of her make-up in the mirror's reflection, silently encouraging herself as her way to start the day.

Just then, a gentle knocking came at her door.

"Leticia-sama, the others from the senior group have gathered."

"Got it, Lily. I will take charge of calling Percher . Just wait for me at the hall."

Lily gave an energetic response of having heard Leticia's words before departing from the doorway.

Listening to Lily's energetic voice and movements, Leticia couldn't help but smile fondly as Lily's optimism and enthusiasm rubbed off on her.

-----The residential area of the [No Name] community was a building of twelve storeys. With the storey of the building representing the position one holds in the community, the rooms get more spacious and well furnished with each storey.

Currently, there's no one living in the quarters above the third storey. It's definitely not because of a lack of people with the calibre needed to reach the positions in the community. But more of convenience that the building has accommodated its members up to the third storey.

Leticia's former bed chamber was at the 10th storey. However, it would be unbecoming for a maid to be quartered in a bedroom over that of her masters. And so, she currently resides in a room for one, beside the kitchen and the pantry.

"If I remember correctly, Shirayuki-hime has left with Izayoi and the others. Seems like I can only share my workload with Percher today…"

Making a beeline for Percher's bedroom, she walked briskly pass the Community's intersection of roads in the hall.

However, she suddenly stopped her footsteps when she caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror that happened to be in the corridor for members to regularly check their appearances in. Seemingly entranced by the sight of her own reflection----

"Hmm-----"

Leticia seemed to be reminiscing a good memory as she gently lifted her skirts slightly and spun on the spot like an innocent teenage girl.

The clean white dress hems fluttered as they got caught in the momentum of her spin, strikingly similar to the blossoming of a flower.

And she spun for a second time before a smile of satisfaction spread across her lips.

“At first, I was against the idea of wearing such an outfit…” Leticia smiled as she continued looking at her reflection in the mirror. “But I guess it does have its own charms…”

“Leticia! What are you doing in front of the mirror?”



Leticia's body froze. Beads of cold sweat were forming out of shame as she knew that the damage had already been done.

What a painful mistake to make, Leticia could only blame it on the peaceful atmosphere that caused her to drop her guard to this extent. But remaining frozen wasn't an option for Leticia either.

Barely containing her trembles, she turned to face Percher------"Black Percher", the other maid who walked out from her bedroom.

Percher had cocked her head to a side seemingly appraising Leticia as though she found something strange.

Leticia, who had been dancing just a little while ago, awkwardly turned her eyes away, unable to meet Percher's gaze.

"Hey, Leticia? What's wrong with you? Your face is really red. Are you okay?"

"……. Nothing, I'm fine. As long as you didn't see it."

"But your ears are red too?"

"I already said that it's nothing!"

"You are going red all the way to the neck too?"

"Hnh, yeah! Just feeling a little high on the blood pressure today than compared to normal days! It's what I get for being a vampire! Mornings that I awake to feeling this flustered and red are just…."

"Your age and outfit really match perfectly, so don't be so shy about it! Moreover, your make-up is so cute too."

Percher made it seem like a victorious proclamation before making her way to the dining hall.

Leticia’s energy also seemed to have left her as she watched the retreating shadow of Percher, her shoulders drooping slightly.

Part 2

---- Half a month has passed since the end of the battle with the huge dragon.

The members of [No Name] continued to busy themselves with various activities while enjoying the peace and freedom of normal life.

Leticia, originally the Demon Lord that hosted the Gift game, has officially become a servant together with two other maids to be in charge of the senior group.

[Underwood]‘s harvest festival was postponed due to the dragon’s attack, but due to large amount of support from 'Thousand Eyes' and other volunteers, the date to resume the celebration has been confirmed.

South had also officially announced the electing of a new Floor Master and invited many guests from the other communities. The Draco Greif Alliance having contributed a lot to the defeat of a Demon Lord would be the most likely candidate to be elected to take the position.

At the same time, [Will-O’-Wisp] and [No Name] have also shared in the honour of having defeated a Demon Lord and are now acknowledged by communities for their fighting prowess.

(Thanks must be given to Sala. Her thoughtfulness to specially advertise for our community’s [No Name] with the last Demon Lord Battle.)

Even if much contributions and feats were accomplished, the [No Name]s lacked an emblem to be officially acknowledged. Sala, the alliance leader, had taken that factor into account and wrote of [No Name]‘s accomplishments in her invitation letters for the resumption of the harvest festival.

Their honesty and kindness helped Leticia regain her composure as she pushed forward into the Community's hallway. The children were already in their neat files, awaiting Leticia's arrival. Lily, the one responsible for calling them in, perked her fox ears upon her entrance and ran over with overalls rustling from her movements.

"Leticia-sama! Good Morning! The senior group has gathered!"

"Really. Good Morning everyone. Eaten breakfast yet?"

"Yes! It was really good too!"

"Today's dish is Omelette rice!"

"I already can't wait to eat lunch!"

"It's still too early."

Leticia smiled wryly while telling off that energetic kid.

There were a total of twenty kids that averaged at the age of 10 that made up the senior group whose purpose was to be in charge of the Community's food and lodgings. Their energetic selves in the early morning seemingly prepared to face the day's tasks ahead was really heart-warming yet sad. Leticia smiled as she gazed upon them.

"Well then, let's start dividing the tasks for the day… but I have something to tell everyone before that."

With that, Leticia took out an invitation letter that had the wax seal emblem of the Draco Greif Alliance stamped on it. Holding the letter, she looked at the children seriously.

“The harvest festival hosted at [Underwood]‘s great waterfall has extended its invitation to welcome all members of [No Name]... did you guys understand that? I will repeat. All members of [No Name], which would include the senior group and the junior group, will be welcomed.”

“Wa~” The Senior group children began cheering.

It was a reaction to be expected from the children as they have never left the Community grounds ever since the attack of the Demon Lord on their Community three years ago. Even if they were to leave the Community, it was only to collect water from the river outside the confinement of the Community’s boundary. This was because of the fear of getting kidnapped and sold off especially since there wasn’t any way for them to identify themselves as a member of [No Name].

Thus to not give trouble or cause worry to their sole guardian, Kuro Usagi, they would simply not leave the boundaries of their Community and were constantly alert while living out their days in the Community.

For these children to receive the invitation to a harvest festival, it was no wonder why they would get this excited.

Though Lily continued to stand by Leticia’s side like a proper representative of the senior group, her prided two fox tails already betrayed her excitement with their energetic wagging.

Leticia who was also caught up in their mood recovered her wits clapped her hand to attract their attention back to her.

“Of course, this is an unprecedented treatment... Don’t forget that this is only made possible by the feats of our masters--- Izayoi, Asuka and Yō having their

contributions acknowledged. And it is also due to their hard work that the invitation letter includes all the members of the Community.” Leticia reminded them.

At the mention of the name of Izayoi and the others, the rowdy children became well behaved.

------ The three people summoned from foreign worlds outside of Little Garden.

Ever since the arrival of Izayoi, Kudou Asuka, Kasukabe Yō in the Community, the life of [No Name] has undergone a total transformation that’s supposed to be only seen in fantasies.

The contribution of the Water Tree seedling to their Community’s dried up reservoir led to the revitalization of their land, making it arable again. At the same time, they have also brought in glass lamps that would light up and warm the Community during the night.

Izayoi and the others* were the idols that the children revered. They were heroes in the children’s eyes.

“This invitation letter is the proof of the trust that they have earned through hard work. Please remember to maintain the baseline of behavior and etiquette upon reaching [Underwood], for we wouldn’t want to sully the reputation that they have helped to build thus far, got it?”

“Yes, we understand!”

The children replied loudly in a jumble of voices that was almost enough to shake one's eardrums to the point of bursting.

Leticia gave a wry smile that was mixed with a genuine hint of a smile that played on her lips as she started to dispatch them for the day's tasks.

"During the duration that we are away from the Commmunity, the 'Draco Greif Alliance' will be dispatching a sentry to look after our boundaries. So to welcome the guest, we shall be giving the residential area of the Community a thorough cleaning. Senior and Junior groups may start to sweep and clear out the trash. There's no need to worry about your luggage for the other two maids and I will bring it over for you guys later. So focus on your tasks of cleaning up---- so let's start!" Leticia clapped her hand to signal the start of their tasks.

With an energetic response, the children left to start their tasks. Only the maid Percher and Lily of the senior group stayed behind with Leticia.

Percher who stood beside Leticia watched the children move off to their tasks with annoyance showing in her eyes.

"How in the world do they find so much energy to accomplish their tasks so early in the mornings?"

"This is the responsibility that they carry as part of the Community. We should also get started before the order of candlestick racks from [Will-O'-Wisp] arrives today."

"Oh, Leticia-sama…" Lily started while wagging her two fox tails in a worried manner.

"Really sorry to interrupt you when you are busy. Can I have a little of your time?"

"No problem. What's the matter, Lily?"

"Ac.. Actually, I have noticed something strange from the basement work room. Occasionally, there would be some strange noises that are coming out from there….."

"That sounds bad and which work room is that?"

"Room number 360."

Leticia tilted her head slightly in surprise.

"…… Room number 360? Why would it be in so isolated an area? Aren't the work rooms that are related to housekeeping from room 1 to 20? The work rooms behind shouldn't be in use."

Leticia furrowed her eyebrows. Lily said she didn't know why either and her fox ears had drooped.

----The so called work rooms were storage facilities for the Gifts earned from Gift games that could be incorporated into the daily life for the Community. Needless to say, the flames for the kitchen to keep it warm, clean water storages were part of those Gifts kept in the work room. Occasionally, Gift ceremonies would be held in the work room too. [Will-O'-Wisp]'s candle stick racks were storages for the Gift of Flame and would also be placed in a work room if according to plan.

Other than shifting the candlestick racks, Kuro Usagi did not mention of any other rituals being held in the work rooms. With that, Leticia would have dismissed the conversation as a misunderstanding if not for the worry that was shadowing Lily's facial expression.

“Work Room 360 has an entrance that exactly opens up behind the quarters for the senior group. The echoes are also heard in the other quarters and the kids from the junior group are also frightened. So, Leticia–sama, would you mind finding time to investigate…..”

Lily was wringing her sleeves as she pleaded.

Leticia folded her arms and was in deep thought. Lily’s words rang true as the members of the junior group were much younger kids and would definitely be frightened by the weird noises.

“Okay…… When everyone has left the Community, I will go and verify for myself.”

“Thank you!”

“It’s a small matter. Okay, let’s go clean up first. After all, even without our masters and Kuro Usagi around, we still have to complete our tasks well.”

“Yes!”

Lily wagged her two tails and replied in a voice that would not have lost to the enthusiasm of the other children before running off to the kitchen.

Percher who was listening to the whole conversation from the side, looked at Leticia.

“Leticia, you plan to skip out on the harvest festival?”

“... How is it possible for me to attend?”

Leticia gave a wry smile.

It wasn’t too long ago that she had merged with the giant dragon due to the plot of some nefarious people.

Even if the culprit wasn't her, the Leticia who had fought against her friends would not be able to forget the past and join the harvest festival. It would cause the host and the other guests to be unhappy.

"The harvest festival this time is a holiday for my masters. I would not want them to worry and be able to enjoy themselves there."

Leticia forced a laugh as it felt awkward talking about it. But her eyes showed no signs of being troubled by it. Now that they have mutually accepted the role of the servant and master relationship, she only had one wish in her heart.

The wish that Izayoi and her other masters will be able to receive lots of Gifts and may luck shine upon them.

"…… Those who become Demon Lords will have to pay off the sins that they have accumulated in the past, no matter the methods. Some with their souls, some by seeking solace in religion, and many other types of methods… I used to give up trying to repent in the past. So from now on, I will chase after my masters and help them in the fight against Demon Lords to erase my sins." Leticia clasped her petite hands together as she said this.

Percher looked at her with disinterested eyes, taking in her appearance that was of one that glowed with having found their road for repentance. Being a Demon Lord herself, the confession of Leticia should be piercing to her ears.

The Leticia who has recovered her composure seemed to have remembered something else as worry crept into her narrowed eyes. "And... I still want to investigate more about Canaria."

"…Oh Really?"

Percher tilted her head slightly as she haden't heard of that name before. But she was more concerned about another matter.

"Oh right. You mentioned that those few people aren't around. I heard from Jin that they are staying in [Underwood], but I didn't know that Kuro Usagi had also left the Community's Boundary. Wasn't she here just yesterday?"

"Eh? Oh, Kuro Usagi..."

Leaving her sentence hanging in the air, Leticia remained silent even if it made Percher surprised by her unnatural response to her question. Continuing the silence, she looked towards the windows where the sunlight was beaming into the Community house.

"Kuro Usagi... Was kidnapped by Shiroyasha." Leticia finished her sentence after a while.

"...what?"

"Yesterday night, Shiroyasha and her servant dropped by and grabbed Kuro Usagi willfully while saying 'I will be going to check in on the old nest of [Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven]'" Leticia said with a faraway look in her eyes.

Percher was surprised but shrugged her shoulders in understanding as she smirked. "The Floor master is so carefree?"

"It can't be that easy. There was a simultaneous attack of a demon lord Aži Dakāha bringing his own division to wreck trouble in the East while the dragon raged in the South. Even though our region was spared, the repairs and construction of Shirayuki-hime's temple." Leticia responded mysteriously.

The repairs of the temple should be the incident whereby water was displaced into a huge canal. However, what surprised Percher wasn't the damage reports, but it was the name of the Demon Lord.

" ...Wait. Demon Lord Azi Dakaha is a demonic dragon that is among the five Demon lords of Zoroastrianism."

" That's right." Leticia answered immediately, causing Percher's smile to fall slightly at the corners.

" ...That can't be true can it? Allowing that evil character to run freely around the Little Garden without a leash on its neck?"

"It isn't possible. Aži Dakāha's situation is special. Ever since the main body was released two hundred years ago, it has created a colony of clones that continued to roam free without anyone being able to restrain them up till today."

"What's that? Scary... Really terrifying. Wouldn't it be better to get rid of the original before it replicates more of itself?"

"Nonsense. If the main body is attacked, the clones will multiply further. Moreover, the first generation are of [Divine] class. Just one of those would be able to create many other Demon Lords of Deity class. How can one simply beat them down when they feel like it?"

------ Demon Lord Aži Dakāha is the dragon within the five demon lords that is revered by the "Fire Cult".

This dragon was from the same source as Indra and boasts of three heads with a huge body. Legend has it that it is able to perform thousands of spells. Even so, the scary part didn't stop there.

The reason that the Demon Lord Aži Dakāha is so terrifying is that it keeps cloning from its wounds. In addition to the impressive vitality it has, it is useless no matter how many chops or punches one throws at it.

The only method to defeat this Demon Lord would be to seal it. However, the reason why it is able to roam free today is precisely because the seal had already been undone by someone.

“Even though I put it that way, to think of stopping the Clones…. The title of the strongest Floor master isn’t just for show. Even after returning her [Divinity] back to Buddha, she wiped out five of the first Gen Demon Lord Clones with one strike. If not for her, the lower levels of East would be dyed red by the bloodbath of sacrifices.”

“…Oh.”

Percher replied indifferently. But within her heart, she was already having cold sweat.

To be able to defeat five Divine class Aži Dakāha First Generation, was already a power out of one’s imaginative ability. Percher having challenged Shiroyasha before and still able to live to tell the tale could be called incredibly lucky.

“But even if she is called the strongest Floor Master, the way she immerses herself in enjoyment is unacceptable.”

“Yea, you are right. When you put it that way, I wouldn’t be able to refute it.” Leticia’s expression was one that was placed in an awkward spot and she forced herself to laugh it off.

Percher nonchalantly headed off to start her tasks, leaving Leticia behind.

Silently watching Percher heading off, Leticia couldn't help but notice a sense of unease within her heart.

Though she knew that Kuro Usagi was with Shiroyasha, and that in itself is an assurance of Kuro Usagi's safety, she still felt a sense of foreboding.

It's all because of the name that Shiroyasha mentioned that would plant a sense of foreboding in anyone when one relates the name of the place to the one that lives there.

(Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven's large encampment…… Even if Little Garden has a huge surface area, the only Community that will use this location… can only be the Bull Demon Lord and no other.)

And it isn't to meet a former Demon Lord. But a Demon King that is known to hate other Demon Lords that throw in their lot with the Buddhist world.

What could Shiroyasha be planning….

After tossing the ideas around for a while, she was unable to get any other conclusion than "If it is her idea, it shouldn't be something that I must read too much into."

(After all, Shiroyasha is the strongest Floor Master. As long as she is around, Kuro Usagi wouldn't be in harm's way.)

Shaking her golden hair, Leticia tried clearing the anxiety from her heart while clasping her hands together to pray for the pitiable Kuro Usagi.

Part 3

----*Ding Ling* Following the movement of her silver hair, the bells gave off a crisp jingle.

A breeze flowed down from the red clay tiles of the roof, bringing the smell of flowers that would have reminded one of being in a peach garden. They walked along the path where the bustle of daily life clamored for attention all around them. A huge mansion stood ahead at the end of the path with the banners of the Community's emblem being flown from its parapets to show the authority over the Outer Gate.

This was Little Garden's Fourth level---Outer Gate Number 6243. Banners of [Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven] flew high and demarcated the higher Floor.

Just outside of the Community's mansion stood a lady with two followers in tow. She stood in a stance befitting of a Door Guardian, with her silver hair that shone with its own brilliance that seemed to compete with the Sun.

"Haiz. How many years has it been since I last visited the headquarters of [Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven]?"

The Beautiful lady wore a purple wafuku with her silver hair pinned with Kanzashis that had bells on its end.

If only that moment could stop for a little longer, it would look like a wonderful portrait. Unfortunately, there was a special aura that seemed to surround her.

….How should I describe it? To put it bluntly, it was the obaa-san aura.

Standing beside the beautiful silver haired lady, that had a polite and peaceful smile, was the [Thousand Eyes] shop assistant of Outer Gate Number 2105380, and Kuro Usagi who was shivering in fear with her ears pressed flat against her head.

"….The last time Shiroyasha-sama came to this place would be around 50 years ago." The question just now could only have been directed towards the shop assistant, so she grudgingly replied.

"Oh. So it seems. Time does fly by very quickly." The silver haired beauty who laughed softly---- Shiroyasha turned back her head to look at her shop assistant as she replied.

She wore a smile that seemed like someone who was going to greet an old friend. This feeling wasn't felt by the other two who were really tense and fearful about being in this place.

The Community that resided here belonged to the upper levels of Little Garden. And it was one who's known to be a strong Demon Lord since a long time ago.

Looking up at the flag flown from the mansion's vantage point, they reaffirmed their determination.

([Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven] Bull Demon King------ and Gorgeous Monkey King Sun Wu Kong had equal footing at the topmost of the Seven Great Demon King Rankings.)

As long as one is from Little Garden, they would have heard of his name.

Of the Seven Great Demon Kings described in The Journey to the West, four with powers so immense, that they are able to overshadow most other life forms, still exist and they are very well known in the realm of Little Garden.

[Great Sage Equalling Heaven] ---------- Handsome Monkey God Sun Wu Kong.

[Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven]---------- Bull Demon King.

[Great Sage Who Devastates Seas] ---------- Saurian Demon King.

[Great Sage Who Leaves Heaven in Disarray] -------- Roc Demon King.

Except for the Handsome Monkey God Sun Wu Kong who followed Xuanzang journey to the west and converted to Buddhism, all the other three have taken up the path of Demon Lords and continued to maintain their communities.

In spite of the fact that these Demon Lords have not committed any major evils since the time that all seven Great Demon Lords challenged Heaven to a battle, their names will always be remembered by those of the Little Garden who think of the term Demon Lords.

However, talking about Demon Lords, Shiroyasha still counts as one of the most befitting as an Elder Demon Lord.

Gazing at the flag fearlessly, she then looked around in disappointment.

“Let’s not talk about the lack of having someone to welcome us…. There’s totally not even a shadow of a living thing outside the doors. I clearly informed them beforehand to prepare a banquet, but it seems that they aren’t too functional in the mind.” Shiroyasha sniffed in disgust.

Kuro Usagi dropped her ears even further, as she started timidly. “Shiro, Shiroyasha-sama…. This is to be expected. The fact that Bull Demon King hates the Buddhist

World is common Knowledge and this is confirmed even by my ears. Even if you do not count me who works for Indra, Shiroyasha-sama's presence would also cause much irritation to them…." Nervously twitching her rabbit ears, Kuro Usagi had held her heart in her mouth.

---Having his sworn brother Sun Wu Kong taken away by the Buddhist world, the emblem of [Great Sage Equalling Heaven] destroyed, and his own son Red Boy (Hong HaiEr) converted to Buddhism. It caused much talk on the street that the rest of the Yōkai Lords under his flag would have an impassable gulf separating them from the Buddhist world.

Though Shiroyasha knows the existence of the gulf, she just shook her head. "No, Kuro Usagi. It's precisely the reason why I chose this time to visit. You would have heard of me returning my [Divinity] back to the Buddhist world, and that makes it the perfect time for me to be here." Shiroyasha said while sweeping back her silver hair.

----- Originally, the [Divinity] title of "Shiroyasha" was obtained after her entry to the Buddhist World.

Being a "White Night" Spirit, she's one of the Celestial beings in Charge of the Sun's orbit, and one who is able to sit on par with the Sun god. Even though she needn't belong to a religion with her immense Spirit Power, she decided to take on the job of a Floor Master and use her position to help the lower levels. The only condition to do so would be the conversion to Buddhism as a means to restrain her powers.

In the previous Demon Lord attack, where she went on the defensive, Shiroyasha had returned her [Divinity] and hence appears to be a grown woman having lost the power to maintain her childlike form.

Silver hair that seemed to reflect light in a way that reminds one of the sun-rays during sunrise. The heroic spirit that surrounded her seemed to befit one with envious amount of Spiritual energy such as her.

Shiroyasha took in the sight of the headquarters silently. Her bells continued to jingle as a gust of wind blew from behind .

“There’s an unknown threat pressuring the lower levels. So as to maintain the peace of the lower levels, we would need the help of the strongest of the higher levels…. Bull Demon King’s strength. ‘Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven’ gathered six Demon Lords under his wing by his own strength. This is evidently no simple feat----I hope you will bravely present yourself, Kuro Usagi.” Shiroyasha used a rarely seen powerful glare on Kuro Usagi.

Facing such a different atmosphere, Kuro Usagi straightened up and perked up her ears as she nodded in agreement. “Yes, understood. Since this concerns the safety of Little Garden, I swear that I will not back down on the pride of a [Moon Rabbit]. Even if I’m stabbed by knives in my sides, I will not retreat.”

“Keke, with that resolve, I’m relieved.”

“Yes! ♪ But what should Kuro Usagi do then?”

“Oh, right. I have not explained to you right? So---- change into this costume!”

Pak,pak! Shiroyasha clapped her hands twice. Immediately, a costume that used little material in its makings appeared before Kuro Usagi's eyes. It was much more minuscule in size compared to the clothes she now wore.

Kuro Usagi's train of thoughts seemed to have pulled the emergency brakes and her rabbit ears were turning pale as blood seemed to drain out of them.

"Shiro...Shiroyasha-sama? This, these clothes are?"

"Mhm! The date of renewal for the rights to being a judge is coming around soon! These are the clothes that I have prepared for you beforehand! So, pick one of these and use your cute seductiveness to entrance the Bull Demon Lord! Let's start from the transparent tight one piece dress that comes with accessories such as a tie and netted stockings…."

"I've already refused those didn't I, you horrible god!"

------*Xiu Pak!* Kuro Usagi swung down her favorite paper fan with much vigor.

"Rea, Really! How can you talk nonsense after coming to this kind of place! Please state your real intentions for dragging me out to this place!"

"Hnh, you are the one who really can't differentiate the place and time for stuff! I'm the strongest Floor Master, Shiroyasha! I swear upon the Gods of Heaven and Earth that I've never taken my work lightly! With all my utmost! Even if it is a prank, I will also give it my all!"

"Are you an idiot? Arrrrrrgh---!"

XiuPak-----! Kuro Usagi used strength that surpassed that of what she has used before to swing her paper fan downwards. Shiroyasha who wasn't quick enough to

dodge the attack was sent flying into the mansion’s outer wall, following with the sound of an explosion, with her head embedded in the wall.

Part 4

“WuWu….. How can it be that you dislike the most sexy and cute outfit that I have chosen for you from my precious collection after much deliberation?”

“…. I don’t care!”

Kuro Usagi’s cheeks and ears were red and turned her face as she threw a small tantrum. The female shop assistant looked upon the two squabbling people with disdain. However, her facial expression changed to a tense one, once they have entered the mansion.

(In spite of the [Divinity]’s return, word was that Bull Demon Lord harbored a hatred against the Buddhist World that could not be written off easily. Even though the possibility is small, I must be alert and ready at all times to prevent them from making any moves on Shiroyasha-sama….)

Walking within the mansion, the female shop assistant had her anxiety plastered across her face while shifting her Gift card to be hidden within the sleeve of her wafuku.

Shiroyasha on the other hand, walks boldly into the mansion that was devoid of presences. Cold sweat had already started to soak the backs of the shop assistant and Kuro Usagi who were still following her while taking much care about their steps.

“How is it that there isn’t anyone here, do they really have to be so unwelcoming towards us to this extent?”

At the corner of Shiroyasha’s mouth, her lips twitched slightly.

The mansion which would normally be bustling with life with the underlings of Bull Demon King rushing to and fro with their tasks would already seem spacious. Without their presence, it seemed much bigger and a little empty.

Though it felt quiet and empty, it was evident from signs of daily life still left behind from the surroundings that there was a recent evacuation. From the silence that caused one to feel ill at ease, one can already deduce how guarded the other party is at the visit of Shiroyasha.

Passing the outer wall corridor, a sudden breeze carrying a light pleasant scent flowed pass them. The sight before them also gradually widened and brightened with light that streamed down from above.

The trio has arrived at the centre of the mansion. The Bull Demon King's throne was just at the end of this walkway.

The imminent audience with the Bull Demon King caused Kuro Usagi to feel more anxious, and she couldn't help but look up at the sky to calm her nerves------

---- At this moment, a curious phenomenon descended from the sky.

"…. Sunlight?"

The ray of light in the air rapidly grew in intensity as it descended before them, from the original warmth of sun-rays to a light of the furthest end on the infrared spectrum that could literally burn the skin with its intensity

A shadow of what may be the source of the heat shimmered in the glaring midst of the space it landed. However, the angle of refraction that they were at forbid them from having a clearer image.

Though the identity of the enemy was still unknown as with their powers, it was clearly an instigative attack on them.

“An ambush like we expected!”

“Shiroyasha-sama, please stand back!”

Kuro Usagi and the shop assistant quickly stood in front of Shiroyasha to shield her, only for Shiroyasha herself to stand with her both arms akimbo, authoritatively and challengingly looking at the attacker. From the body that continued to emit heat waves, one piece fell away, two, three pieces of gold glittery feathers that lightly spun as they fell to the ground.

Looking at the feathers, Shiroyasha immediately guessed the identity of the person and her expression changed to that of surprise.

“…… That’s surprising. Have you forgotten the letter of greeting, or were you unable to bear to let your sworn brother meet up with people who have close relations with the Buddhist world, Roc Demon King?”

“Eh?”

The sound escaped from Kuro Usagi and the shop assistant at the same time.

In a flash, sunlight was converted to a stifling heat wave that covered the skies and illuminated the area.

“---- King of the White Night, if only the guest didn’t include any others, I would not be this preposterous.”

The voice of a woman seemed to resound from the air above them.

Heat and light surrounded the inner court, gradually becoming golden flames that surrounded Shiroyasha and her entourage. The feathers that floated around lightly---- no, it was a whirlwind created from the movements of the blazing golden wings that hailed the entrance of the attacker.

The attacker had tied back her black hair, wearing an outfit embroidered with elegant designs that boldly exposed her back and arms. A pair of blazing golden wings could be seen on her back.

Having seen their attacker's appearance, Kuro Usagi and the shop assistant turned pale.

"A human appearance and those blazing golden wings….. could it be------ Great Garuda!"

"How can it be! The highest divine bird that is on par with the Juniten(12) Deva Guardians……."

Flames continued to surround the two who kept staring at the aggressor---- Roc Demon King with eyes that seemed to voice their surprise.

Still having cold sweat, the two hurriedly tried to ready their stance for an upcoming battle. However, Shiroyasha patted their shoulders, seemingly to signal them to calm down their hyped up tension.

"Well now, you two should just cool it. This person is undoubtedly a phoenix, but not of the purest lineage. She's just a runaway royal princess."

"….what?"

"Run, Runaway… Princess?"

“Roc Demon Lord?” Both of them asked at once, while looking her over calculatingly.

Much as her clothing and accessories look resplendent with their elegant designs, the bare back that exposed much of her skin, Roc Demon Lord’s appearance seemed youthful. Despite of the addition of makeup, the baby face under the cosmetics was still visible.

The glittery accessories that act as decorum for her soft and tender complexion.

In addition to the aura that exudes from her dainty movement that shows her noble backgrounds.



The cross between the two makes a powerful charm that could release worldly desires to commit sins.

Roc Demon King's body exuded an aura that was different from the other Demon Lords and she seemed to detest being called "hime". Walking over in a huff, she stared angrily at Shiroyasha.

"King of the White Night, please know the limits and not use that kind of nickname. A thousand years have passed and the girl has since grown up. A princess would be a queen by now."

"Then you should also change the way you call me. I'm not a Demon Lord anymore. If you do not agree…Hmph, I will just follow your lead and call you like how I used to a thousand years ago. Calling you in front of others in a loving voice 'Karyou-chan ♪'------"

In a flash, the flames of the surroundings rushed towards Shiroyasha and the others.

Flames of the Golden Wing is a Gift of the highest order that is often used against Gods and Dragons for it can disintegrate anything that it touches.

Even then, those flames that should reduce people to nothingness---- were collected within the palm of Shiroyasha, without letting the heat escape from her grasp.

(Flames…Flames of the Golden Wing was so easily….)

The legendary Flames of the Golden Wing that was rumored to be stronger than that of the flames of Hell has coagulated in a clump within Shiroyasha's palm before it was pinched into powder. Shiroyasha who had returned her [Divinity] could now utilize her original Celestial Spiritual powers and would be more than a match for Roc Demon King.

Kuro Usagi who had collapsed on the floor just from the heat waves, held her breath as she watched the confrontation.

The kind of heat that she wouldn't dream to try touching with her own power was that easily crushed by Shiroyasha to nonexistence. It is evident from this that those who live a Demon Lord's existence can crush others while having an enjoyable conversation within a flash.

It is only now that Kuro Usagi realized how terrible a place she has been brought to and her ears immediately pressed against the side of her head.

Roc Demon King's brows rose slightly for a while after attacking Shiroyasha. Though her veins started to become more prominent due to her anger, she still kept her attitude of being authoritative as she continued the tongue fight.

"…..Heh. Seems like your power is just as monstrous as ever, King of the White Night."

"Then that means you are just a little runt too, Karyou-chan?"

Shiroyasha replied while laughing, clearly not caring about her choice of words.

A few more veins became more evident on the face of Roc Demon King, but she realized that a battle of tongues would not lead her anywhere and decided to leave it as that. She then dismissed the heat wave that seemed to feel like the burning of phosphorus with her flaming golden wings.

The two followers scrambled to their feet in embarrassment having collapsed on the ground from the series of events, and only just returning to their senses.

(Little did I expect her to be a princess of the Phoenix lineage. It is said that Roc Demon King's rank is only around the middle of the Seven Great Demon Kings……)

One can already deduce how monstrous the other six Demon Kings are.

What would the power of "Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven" ----the oldest of the Seven Great Demon Kings, whom they are going to meet, be like? Just imagining it was able to cause one to feel chilly down their spines and shiver involuntarily.

Roc Demon King gave a sidelong glance at Kuro Usagi before turning her gaze back to Shiroyasha.

"What is your business with my Big Brother? If it were only you who have returned your [Divinity], it would have been more forgivable. You just had to bring Indra's toy into the headquarters of [The One that Flattens Heaven]…. This is a preposterous action enough for us to assume your declaration of war."

"Oh, GomeGome(very sorry). I also have my difficult circumstances. I will explain after we go in, so would you please help to lead the way to the throne room?"

Shiroyasha stepped forward a little as she smiled warmly, seeming to try shield Kuro Usagi with herself. They expected Roc Demon King to use violence again but she only gave a sheepish expression as she replied.

"….Sorry to say, my Big Brother isn't in."

"What did you say?"

This answer was definitely beyond Shiroyasha's expectations.

Roc Demon King folded her arms after arranging her sleeves while she narrated the reason for his absence.

“Ever since Big Brother left to help out the [OniHime] Alliance about half a month ago, he hasn’t been back. However, Brother has always been like this, and most likely to be enjoying himself somewhere now.”

“Ho, How can this be…..”

Shiroyasha stuttered in shock.

This was an answer that even Shiroyasha had not expected.

------ She had heard of the Bull Demon King’s departure to help the [OniHime] Alliance and the North Floor Master in the simultaneous attack of the Demon Lords half a month ago, but she had also received the reports that he had left quickly after defeating the demon lords. And so she had thought that Bull Demon King would have returned to his Community.

“Then your presence in this place is for?”

“Well, his advisors begged me to help my Big Brother welcome you. And we had actually readied a banquet…. Since you had to bring the livestock of the Buddhist World to this abode, I had no choice but to let it go to waste.”

“……Wu!”

Roc Demon King used her sleeve to cover her mouth as she shot an insulted look towards Kuro Usagi.

Even though Kuro Usagi has an amicable character, but being the target of insults one after another, her brows had furrowed in anger. After all, she was still one of the

[Highborn of Little Garden] that had a long history in Little Garden. Not using her powers did not mean that she lacked pride or self-appreciation.

Kuro Usagi stepped forward a step, planning to give a piece of her mind back at the other party-----

“Why? DO YOU INTEND TO CHALLENGE ME, [Moon Rabbit]?”

------ Kuro Usagi rapidly retreated 3 steps back, with her rabbit ears flopping down.

The scene was like that of a snake staring till the frog retreated------No, it was a rabbit being stared into retreating by an eagle.

Let’s not mention about Shiroyasha. Even the shop assistant gave an icy glare at Kuro Usagi who backed away so quickly from the challenge.

“Kuro Usagi that was seriously an embarrassment.”

“That’s right. That’s why you are called by your companions as [(Disgraceful) Highborn of Little Garden].”

“No, it’s not like that! It’s just a tactical retreat since I remembered that Indra and Phoenix’s attributes are not able to have a good compatibility in a fight.---- Wait, how did you know of that nickname Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Kuro Usagi gave a moan from her soul. The shop assistant on the other hand froze for a moment before continuing:

“…. Huh? You mean that it is really the case that you are called [(Disgraceful) Highborn of Little Garden]?”

“-----Huh?” This time it was Kuro Usagi’s turn to freeze on the spot.

It would seem that the shop assistant's surprise wasn't feigned.

In other words, the words she used "just happen to be similar by coincidence".

The lineage of [Moon Rabbits] with long history in Little Garden is now getting called that with the addition of (lol)……Though the shop assistant didn't ask further, her expressions betrayed her thoughts.

And it was that pure gaze of puzzlement that cut deeper into Kuro Usagi's pride.

"….Gu, GuWu…. Wa, Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa----------!"

With such a serious blow to her pride that she had never experienced before, Kuro Usagi broke down into tears while running back the way they came, continuing her weird wail as she ran.

Not expecting this turn of events, the shop assistant had a panicky expression as she watched the fleeing back of Kuro Usagi. Shiroyasha's response was also out of the norm as she waved her right hand while feeling a headache from this trouble.

"Haiz, I'm going to be fine here. You better go catch and coax Kuro Usagi to come back. She must have worked too hard in the past few days and accumulated too much stress that exploded today."

"G… Got it."

Giving a respectful glance at Roc Demon King as she took her leave, she broke into a small jog in the same direction where Kuro Usagi had fled to.

Roc Demon King who had been out of the picture for a moment continued to be in a daze for a while longer before regaining her bearings after seeing the backs of those two disappear from her sight.

"…… It would seem that the one that you have brought is a very strange mutation."

"Really? The rabbits that I know of are mostly like this."

"Is it?" Roc Demon King doubtfully cocked her head to one side.

Shiroyasha sighed in aspiration as she gazed up at the banner of [Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven].

"But, this is a real headache. To be unable to meet with the first candidate I have in mind: Bull Demon King… might as well pass it to those little rascals and be done with it…… No, not good. It is still too early for them……" Shiroyasha muttered for a while.

Perhaps the departure of Kuro Usagi made Roc Demon King feel more comfortable, her tone had warmed and softened a little. "Regardless, I have to apologize for the fact that my brother is unable to welcome you personally. I will help you take the message for him till he returns."

"No, This matter will have no meaning if I do not do it personally. Moreover, I do not have the time. Since I do not know when he will be back, I will just have to find another candidate……"

"Candidate?"

"Yea." Shiroyasha nodded her head vigorously.

Pausing for a moment to consider if her words would be appropriate to be told to others, she continued after concluding that it did not matter if it was made known---

-

"I ….. decided to temporarily resign from the position of Floor Master of the East sector."

"……What?" Roc Demon King showed an unsurpassed amount of shock on her face upon hearing those words.

But in afterthought, this decision was only plausible. Shiroyasha had once been branded with the deeds of a Demon Lord. It was only due to having converted to the Buddhist World on the promise of becoming a kind deity that she obtained the rights to govern the lower levels.

Currently, Shiroyasha has lost her backing.

It is only expected for her movements to be restricted after returning her [Divinity].

"That's why I needed someone to help me take on the job with sufficient power to be a [Floor Master]."

Shiroyasha's words held a sense of unshakeable determination and decisiveness that included the weight of the responsibilities that was comparable to Mount Tai in stress and load. The severity of the atmosphere caused Roc Demon King to intake a breath as she guessed the meaning of Shiroyasha's words.

"But after resigning from being the Floor Master….. shouldn't you be going back to your former level in Little Garden and not here in the level 4 area?"

"Sorry, I still have another reason that I cannot tell you about…… Wherever I go to is not the problem but the need for a distinguished Floor Master is indispensable."

"And your point?"

"Hmh…. Currently the [Floor Master]s other than me would be [Salamandra], [OniHime] Alliance and [Draco Greif] Alliance that are still active. And their leaders were lacking in battle experience with Demon Lords.. So long as a situation of a huge scale occurs, I won't be able to deal with it by myself."

They were all from level five Communities and Alliances that boasted of their numbers. Within the middle levels, they were definitely a power to be reckon with, even countable within the Highest of the middle levels, with cohesiveness capable of dealing with Demon Lords. However, a fight with a Demon Lord would be a fierce battle beyond imagination.

Just like the previous encounter where there was a simultaneous attack by Demon Lords, they were ill prepared to deal with the situation with their capabilities.

And to lose the strongest [Floor Master], Shiroyasha, at this critical time would be very dangerous.

"Hence, I chose an experienced, knowledgeable and professional at Demon Lord games---- your sworn brother: Bull Demon King."

Unfortunately, the most suitable candidate wasn't at home.

If it were him who had rushed to the aid of [OniHime] Alliance when they were in need--------- it was the hope that she had, but the result was like using a wicker basket to fetch water----a futile effort.

The irritated and troubled Shiroyasha sank into deep thought as she tried to think up of another candidate.

But her thoughts was interrupted by the following words.

“…. Really? Since it seems like a hot matter, I will not withhold from you any longer.”

“What are you talking about?”

Shiroyasha asked in reflex. Roc Demon King remained silent but seemed to have given in as she took out a letter that she threw to Shiroyasha.

“This is something that the counsellor wanted me to pass to you-----'THIS IS THE LETTER THAT WAS WRITTEN TO SHIROYASHA BEFORE BULL EMPEROR LEFT TO PROVIDE AID’.”

“Wha…”

Shiroyasha was stumped for words this time.

If she told the truth, it would mean that Bull Demon King had predicted her visit. Moreover that letter had the wax seal emblem of ‘Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven’.

It would seem that there wasn’t a need to doubt any further. It was a letter written personally by Bull Demon King for Shiroyasha.

[He was able to guess my visit?]

Knitting her brows together, she opened the letter in surprise.

Written in a line of untidy words----

“A Budding successor lies within the Southern Great Tree. May the lord make a trip yonder.”

The words were succinct without any extra details.

Shiroyasha read the line for two or three times, before feeling enlightened----- With that, she gave off a laugh that sounded like a cheer.

“Hahahah…… [Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven] predicted the future even from a distance of a thousand miles! Looks like that old youth still has much tactics up his sleeve and still remains as sharp as ever!”

Shiroyasha clutched her sides as she burst into laughter.

…… Her judgement hadn’t been wrong. This piece of credibility has just strengthen it.

Happily turning back the way she came, her long silver hair spread outwards like an opened harisen.

“You have helped out lots, Karyou-chan! Thanks to you, I have found a sliver of light! I will prepare a present for you in the meantime!”

“……Since you want to express your gratitude, then stop calling me “Karyou-chan” already.”

Roc Demon King retorted in exasperation as her shoulders drooped slightly. But Shiroyasha continued to laugh as she walked the way back.

Ding Ling ---- Leaving a clear and crisp jingle of the bell that hung in the air, Shiroyasha walked briskly out of the headquarters of ‘Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven’.

Chapter 1

Part 1

---[Underwood] Foot of the Mountain, Reception area for the Harvest Festival

Shiroyasha only let Kuro Usagi go after keeping her for three more days.

The Sun slowly sank in the western horizon and the view of the Great Tree City would soon be swallowed up by the color of night.

At this point in time, Kuro Usagi faced her back to the sunset as she took a breather and stretched herself.

"Hu……. Freedom at last."

Her rabbit ears perked up in alertness before flopping down lifelessly. Since the moment Shiroyasha showed up to drag her along for the journey, Kuro Usagi had already mentally prepared herself, but she hadn't expected the reason for the kidnap to be so random.

[Forget it…… Shiroyasha-sama may be trying to cover something up when she used that kind of joke as a perfunctory reason.]

Being in the position of a [Floor Master], she wouldn't be able to tell her secrets that easily.

……Maybe it's just me who cannot accept the fact that I was used as a decoration. No, no, no, how can that be….

Either way, Shiroyasha seemed to have achieved her aim.

Shiroyasha kept muttering about wanting her to wear the transparent tight one piece dress till the very end and Kuro Usagi who managed to escape, albeit with much trouble, from the grasp of that demon can finally take a breather.

Arriving at the reception area for the Harvest Festival, Kuro Usagi ran into the dryad Kirino.

"I'm Kuro Usagi of [No Name]. Could I trouble you to show me the way to the guest rooms?"

"Your registry is accepted…… Oh, but the members of [No Name] aren't in their rooms now."

Kuro Usagi cocked her head in puzzlement. Kirino handed over to Kuro Usagi a map of the Harvest Festival grounds and the event timelines that were all drawn on goatskin parchments.

"From what I know----- Sakamaki Izayoi-sama is reading in the underground library. Kudou Asuka-sama and Kasukabe Yō-sama are participating in the hunting event. Jin Russel-sama has brought his companions to meet up with the representative of [Six Scars]. Lily-chan…..Erhm…. Lily-sama and the senior group have gone to help out with the preparations for the opening event."

"Wow, everyone is so dispersed throughout the city."

Scratching her ears, Kuro Usagi gazed up at the Great Tree of [Underwood].

"Let's make it simple then. I will go look for Izayoi-san. Which is the route I should take to reach him?"

"Nn…. There's only one way to get there, through the waterway, and you would need someone to ferry you. But with the preparations for the festival underway, we currently do not have the people to spare----"

"Oh if it is like this, then may I do it?"

"Eh?" Kuro Usagi and Kirino both turned their heads to look at the other end of the Reception area. The man that walked into the Reception area was of a tall stature, thin and long eyes with a lone eye patch across one of them. Not only was his smile very suspicious, as with his way of speech that seemed to be Kansai dialect but at the same time seemingly not.

"Kouryuu-sama …. Is this okay? You're the VIP guest of [Draco Greif] and needn't trouble yourself."

"It's fine, it's fine. No worries. We can help each other out since you guys are shorthanded."

The man who walked into the Reception area patted Kirino's head lightly.

Kuro Usagi tilted her head.

[Hmmm…… This person…..]

---Strong. Even though the person wasn't showing any aggression towards them, Kuro Usagi's instincts had reflexively responded by placing her in high alert.

His attitude was casual and chic, but his brisk footsteps and posture when standing didn't leave any weakness to be exploited. Evidently, he was mentally prepared to do battle at any given moment. At a glance, those firm muscles packed within his body would have told of unimaginable years of training.

As for the most obvious thing that felt amiss------ was the fact that he lacked the Domineering aura that would usually surround such figures.

[If he's hiding it in out of consideration for Kirino-san, it would be fairly impressive. For someone with such natural movements to be repressing his Aura to this extent is definitely a rare sight.]

Prowess obtained from adhering to a strict regime of training tends to surround a person in the form of a Domineering Aura. Just from the regal airs given off from this person, it should have overwhelmed the female dryad with awe and fear without having to move an inch.

However this man before them------ Kouryuu has completely hidden his Domineering Aura.

"Hello, we meet for the first time, Miss [Highborn of Little Garden]. My name is Kouryuu and I'm just one who wanders around Little Garden. I have no surname so I'm fine with any way that you call me by." He said while walking up to Kuro Usagi maintaining his hearty smile that looked suspicious on his face, before bowing.

Even though everything about this man made him look dubious,…….not a trace of ill will was felt from him. Only then did Kuro Usagi decide to trust this man.

"YES, Please take care of me!"

"Haha, really energetic. Then, let's go find the underground waterways."

Having left the reception area together, they boarded one of the gondolas that would go to the underground library.

The gondola was a necessity since one would need to cross the waterway to reach the hollow that was a gap between the roots of the Great [Underwood] tree, on the other bank. Though it wasn't impossible to swim across, it was still out of personal safety since one might just swim off the edge of the waterfall at the end of the waterway and fall all the way down.

Finally, the gondola reached the bank. Ventilation here was poor and within the river nearby, the air was saturated with moisture. And that made the site the worst possible place for a library.

"Wh, Why would a library be built in this kind of place?"

"About this, I had similar doubts when I first saw it too. Anyway, let's go in first." Under Kouryuu's urging, Kuro Usagi reached out to the big doors.

Pushing open the doors of the Library, a blast of hot dry air hit them as it rushed out from within.

(Wow…..) Dry air brushed pass her face. Kuro Usagi absentmindedly took a large breath of the dry air into her lungs and started to cough. Hurriedly, she closed the doors behind her.

"So….So that's how it works. The roots of the Water Tree absorbs the moisture from the air and creates a natural drying chamber."

"Yes that is how it is. I will wait on the gondola, go quickly and find your friend." Kouryuu waved his hand while lighting his pipe.

Kuro Usagi walked briskly, deeper into the library, looking for Izayoi. She noted that the environment was quite stifling and would be detrimental for one's health if one stayed in here for a long duration. With that in mind, she swore to herself to

bring Izayoi away with her as fast as she could. Scanning the shadows of the ancient book shelves, she finally made her way to the centre of the library.

Upon seeing the flickering shadow of a person that was casted by the light of a gasoline lamp, Kuro Usagi called out:

"….Izayoi-san?"

"Eh? Oh! It's Kuro Usagi." Izayoi who seemed to be so engrossed, with his face buried within the pages of the book, didn't seem to notice Kuro Usagi's approaching. Though his voice sounded surprised, Kuro Usagi was more surprised than him.

The reason was due to the accessory that she had never seen him wear on his face before------

"Wh, What's this? Tha….. That pair of spectacles."

"Jack sold this to me. Setting aside the dry air conditions, this place is quite dark. According to him, the glass of these spectacles can adjust the refractive index of light and enable night vision."

Saying so, he pushed to readjust the spectacles on his nose.

The glasses with a thin outer frame gave Izayoi a learned look. When placed together with the knowledgeable Izayoi, this kind of appearance suited him more than his usual look.

"Real, Really surprising. Izayoi-san looks very good with spectacles."

"……Nn? Even if you say it out of courtesy, I don't have any presents for you."

"No, it's true, Kuro Usagi really thinks that way! Compared to your normal look, you seem more matured…… and more knowledgeable, having a cool handsome look!"

Kuro Usagi hurriedly gesticulated her arms as she said it.

[Hmm?] Izayoi lifted his head from his book and shifted his gaze upwards. If it were the normal him, one or two retorts, three to four teasing or statements of over excessive self-consciousness taking the form of words, but it was such a pity that he was suffering from a sleep deprivation today.

Under Izayoi's gaze, it was only then did Kuro Usagi realize how embarrassing her words must have sounded. Blushing red to the tips of her rabbit ears, she twitched her ears nervously.

Lifting his sleepy head, Izayoi gave a yawn before getting up to stretch his body.

"Well, if you praise me that much, how can I not feel happy?"

"R….Really?"

"Of course. Oh and would you happen to know what time it is outside?"

"The sun has started to set a while ago."

"Oh. Then, the hunting event should be ending about now. I will be finding Lily to talk about tonight's matters before meeting up with Oujosama and Kasukabe. That Chibi-sama will also be finalizing the Alliance creation."

"Eh?" Kuro Usagi gave a gasp of surprise. Izayoi also looked at her in surprise.

"What, you haven't heard of our prospective alliance with [Six Scars]?"

"When, When was that!"

"Around todays ago. Initially, I went to approach Uncle Garol for a small talk, but my question was postponed. [Six Scars] was in the midst of a change of leadership, so he hoped that we would bring the request for an Alliance after the transfer of leadership is finalized and discuss our futures with the newly appointed leader."

"So that's how it is." Kuro Usagi nodded uneasily.

---After the previous battle with the huge dragon, [No Name] has obtained the rights to move up to the sixth level and have their lands and facilities returned to them. However, the conditions to rise up to the sixth level required the [emblem] to be hung from the door of the Community's perimeter. And this condition could not be cleared at the present moment since [No Name]'s emblem and "Name" were stolen by the Demon Lord."

Hence, they thought of creating an "Alliance Flag"------the proof of a Community being part of an Alliance to fill up the current inadequacy.

"Having heard stories of our long standing relations with the Community of [Six Scars], I would think that it would go well. As long as Chibi-sama doesn't screw up, it won't be a problem."

"Rea, Really?"

Her rabbit ears drooped in unease. If it were [Six Scars]'s Garol, half the negotiations would be in the bag without any outrageous demands from the other party. But to let a Community without name to meet with a newly appointed leader that have none of the past relations and a stranger to them, who knows whether the person would try to pick on them?

Izayoi only gave a tired yawn in response.

"No worries. Unless you do not have any confidence in Chibi-sama?"

"No. That's not it! But for them to choose this time to hand the leadership to the next generation….. it would mean that the negotiations would be the biggest job for the new leader. If the new leader is one who wants to build a name for themselves fast, the other party might try to resort to any means necessary."

"Nn. Your words sound reasonable too."

"So, Izayoi-san should go and help Jin-sama come up with some strategies….."

---*Pak! * Kuro Usagi's head was flicked once.

Though the strength wasn't much, the suddenness of the action caused Kuro Usagi to rub her forehead and stop talking.

Izayoi squinted at her with a sleepy face. "Kuro Usagi, relax and don't worry. Chibi-sama's negotiation will------Will Definitely Be A Success." He concluded with life returning to his eyes that seemed so trance-like earlier.

His conviction was that strong that it sounded like the declaration of a fact. Seeing that confidence, Kuro Usagi couldn't help but swallow the words that came to the edge of her mouth.

Whenever Izayoi used that kind of tone, it meant that he already arrived at a definite answer in his heart. His words were credible…. But the thought of the target of trust being Jin, Kuro Usagi felt uneasy.

Izayoi was getting tired of her lack of confidence, but he smiled in understanding. Reaching out his hand, he flicked twice more.

"Actually, I'm not unable to follow Kuro Usagi's sense of worry. After all, to believe in the one that you have always seen to be a little brother is definitely going to be quite a bother."

*Pak! Pak! *

"However, you should place your confidence in him for this once. This may be the first biggest task for the other party, but the same can be said for our Chibi-sama. Under the same circumstances, wouldn't it be an unnecessary worry?"

"Y… Yeah."

*Pak! Pak! Pak! *

"Moreover, I've already looked through Chibi-sama's negotiation strategy. Since he has prepared that "Trump Card", there's no way that he will lose. You just have to leave it to him."

Pak, Pak, Pak, PakPakPakPakPak!

"I… I got it, I got it already! So---- stop it! Quick, stop it, Izayoi-san!"

---*Pak!* The total number of times that Kuro Usagi's forehead got flicked was fifteen.

Drawing a sharp intake of breath after unleashing the fifteenth attack, Izayoi stared at Kuro Usagi with a face full of amazement. Following that, his eyes lit up with a glow that seemed to have found enlightenment as he said:

"…… [Highborn of Little Garden (Deko)]."

"Annoying---------!"

Whoosh! A satisfying sound echoed in the library of [Underwood].

Hearing the sound of Kuro Usagi's smack that blew Izayoi away, Kouryuu hurriedly shouted

"Hey, what happened? That sounded like an explosion just now."

"It… It's nothing!"

Kuro Usagi quickly hid her favorite paper fan.

Izayoi tilted his head towards the voice and asked in a softer voice.

"Who's that? I don't seem to recognize this voice."

"He's a guest of the [Draco Greif] Alliance, Kouryuu-san. He's still waiting for us on the gondola. We should hurry up and go now."

As soon as she finished her words, she grabbed his collar. And just like that, Izayoi was dragged out of the library where he scrunched his brows upon seeing Kouryuu.

"…… What an insincere smile."

" Oi!"

"Keke. That's how people describe me all the time. Even my sister would use the words 'suspicious and or something's fishy' to poke fun at me."

Kouryuu hugged his sides as he laughed out loud. Looks like he already knew of this problem and was treating it like nothing as he rowed the oars of the gondola.

Watching the carefree Kouryuu who was smoking his pipe while rowing the boat, Izayoi asked out of curiosity:

" ……You aren't allowed to join the Games of the Harvest Festival?"

"Of course not. I'm just a wanderer. Just one who flows with the waves as I wander aimlessly around Little Garden."

"Oh really? Then that's too bad. Judging by your strength, there should be quite a number of people trying to recruit you to their side, right?"

[Eh?] Kuro Usagi couldn't help but let out that sound when she heard her thoughts being voiced out by Izayoi's words. However, Kouryuu only gave a wry smile while shaking his head.

"Haha. You are really overstating my worth. There's no Community that would want to have me, a guy who couldn't even protect his own home emblem."

Kouryuu laughed it off and took a breath from his pipe.

Izayoi frowned while Kuro Usagi hurriedly covered her mouth in reflex.

" …. So it's like that. My bad."

"No problem. Garol even said that I'm a 'floating withered log', right in my face too."

"Well said. Seeing that you lack the domineering aura, that kind of description fits you."

Izayoi laughed loudly while Kouryuu only showed a wry smile.

Though Kuro Usagi felt troubled, but she cast her eyes down in understanding.

[So it was true…… He wasn't hiding his domineering aura but it was because he didn't have the domineering aura……]

'Floating withered log' refers to how one having his dreams shattered or stripped away from his essence, decides to wander around the world aimlessly. How Kouryuu

had lost his Community was not known to her, but she could see that the emotional scar was one that would not be easily healed.

Izayoi tried to change the topic by asking Kuro Usagi:

"Oh right! Kuro Usagi, where were you dragged to this time?"

"Ah……It's a long story. We went to the South, headquarters of "Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven"------"

---*KUWANGpank!* The gondola started to rock violently.

"Wa Ya…….!"

The sudden rocking of the gondola caused Kuro Usagi to lose her balance and fall right onto Izayoi.

"Ah, My bad! Are you two alright?"

Kouryuu frantically adjusted the rudder.

Though Izayoi was also surprised, his reactions were much faster.



[OH? This is indeed a blessing.]

The feel of Kuro Usagi's curvaceous and bountiful body pressing against him, following the rocking of the gondola was definitely nice. Setting aside her soft supple and bountiful bosom, those hands of hers that were covered in a skin so smooth that it seemed like silk would cause people to sink in a sweet feeling of being blessed upon a touch. If it were any normal man, just coming into contact with her thigh would cause them to lose their senses and force themselves on her, setting their hands upon those tender skin that seemed like first snow.

---No wonder they were called the plaything of the gods. Even without the Gift of Seduction, contact was more than enough to unleash lust.

"Ah…. Ya… S…..Sorry!"

Kuro Usagi couldn't help but start blushing, with the color of her blush rising all the way to the tips of her ears and hair, dying them red. She hurriedly distanced herself from Izayoi. For the innocent and pure Kuro Usagi, that accident must have left quite an impact on her.

[Aiyo…… To have that kind of sexy appearance and yet being able to develop that type of character.]

Izayoi sighed while nodding his head, seemingly feeling a sense of respect for such a development.

Although it was only for less than ten seconds, this kind of stimulation was enough to drive away Izayoi's sleepiness. Izayoi attributed the blessing to be----- a result of his karma accumulation from everyday deeds.

He then realized that his conversation with Kuro Usagi hadn't finished yet. "….Oh right, por Kuro Usagi."

"Wait a moment. You just said 'por' right? You are trying to say 'por' something along those lines, right?!"

"….Oh right, porno Kuro Usagi."

"Who called you to say out the full term, you Baka!"

Swhoosh! With a wave of the paper fan, Izayoi frowned.

"……Highborn of Little Garden (por……)"

"Stop it you big Bakaaaaaaaaaa!"

Swhoosh----------! Kuro Usagi swung her fan with all her might.

Rocking more violently this time, Kuro Usagi once again lost her balance and right into Izayoi's chest.

Part 2

---[Underwood], Northeastern plateau with a sea of trees that grew wildly on its top, Edge of the Boundary.

Fifteen minutes before Izayoi and Kuro Usagi met up.

Upon the plateau that was dyed scarlet by the setting sun, little dust twisters were born from the raging tornado like winds.

The suddenness of the strong winds caused the queer looking flock of birds----- a eudemon that was a cross between a deer and bird having the stag horns and bird wings, the Perytons flapped their wings to take to the skies.

"----Now's the time!"

The voice of a girl came from a little hill where the winds appeared to have blown from-------That was the signal given by Kasukabe Yō.

The flock that was driven to the skies and out of the cover of the forest was immediately under fire from arrows that were shot from the sea of trees below. And seven of them fell from the skies.

"I hit them!"

"That was a good catch!"

"No, it's not over yet!"

The cheers of the hunters could be heard from the sea of trees, but some were still on their guards. Having shot their wings to prevent the Perytons escape, the Perytons had already half-risen their bodies to point their sharp horns towards their attackers.

The Perytons have prepared their stance and finally showed their true colors---- the ferocious nature of a predator.

However, the follow-up attack was from another girl upon the shouted order from Asuka.

"Mel! Use the chance to destroy their stability!"

"Yes!"

Accompanying the young child's voice, the ground beneath the Peryton's legs became a muddy slush that sealed their movements.

The Perytons' who had their flight and stable ground stolen from them couldn't help but fall to the ground without being able to move. The hunters wasted no time to use their arrows to seal their fates when they saw this good opportunity.

Having ran over to see the results of the hunt, Yō gave a sigh of relief and relaxed her shoulders.

"…. Asuka, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Kasukabe-san, thanks for your hard work."

"Thanks, and with this we should be ranked in the top few of the Hunting event?"

"It may not be so. However, the rules did say that horned eudemons are awarded more points, so I guess we can hope for the best."

Setting their goal on the coming out first, they nodded to each other in confidence.

---This hunting event that they participated in was one of the Gift Games hosted for the Harvest Festival.

After the battle with the huge dragon, those eudemons that are classified under the category of 'aggressive man eaters' continued to roam the perimeter of [Underwood].

After they started to launch attacks on the reviving Communities, the [Draco Greif] Alliance could not stand by and watch it anymore, deciding to purge the pest that were the Perytons. So—

"This kind of chance shouldn't be wasted with so many participants on hand at the Harvest Festival. Why not make it into a game that amasses the participants and host a hunting event in an attempt to welcome them?"

-------Izayoi's suggestion was well received by the host who then implemented his idea. And that was how the currently ongoing Game was formed. The duo bent their heads poring over the sheepskin parchment that was the [Geass Roll], as they reread to confirm the rules of the game.

<<GIFT GAME NAME: "[Underwood] Harvest Festival * Hunting Department">>

List of Participant(s):

***Free for all (Please register for this event to participate. Registration ends one day before the game event)**

Rule(s):

***Competition will be between Communities (The game allows the formation of alliances in the midst of the game.)**

***All participants are to wear the hunting equipment provided, be it a human or sub human participant.**

***To determine the winner, results of the score will be calculated by the weight of the game.**

***Game that have horns would be awarded extra points [However this is limited to game that can be used for ingredients].**

***Duration of the event will start from noon of the day before the Harvest Festival till the sun set on the same day.**

Oath: ***Participating Community, swear upon your glory and flag to respect the above stated content.***

"[Draco Greif] Alliance" Seal

Scanning through the Game clearing conditions once more, they nodded to each other.

"Perytons of this size with the addition of their horns, there should be high points awarded for these."

"Hehe. Yep. Though half of the points would go to the members of [Six Scars], it should still be quite high."

"Nn. But my Gift is almost at its maximum use limit…… and it's almost time we went back."

The duo turned to look at the line of people transporting the Perytons they had caught behind them.

One of the members came over energetically. "Wow! So our regular customers were that strong! With this amount of game, the Harvest Festival will be fired up!"

[Six Scars]' Carol Gundark lightly waved her nicely bent tail.

She too wore the hunting armor and helmet and the bow and arrows issued to the participants of this Game.

"Perytons aren't only ferocious, they like to gather in a flock. If it were up to us only, it wouldn't have gone so well. To be able to bring down these many game with much ease, our female regulars are definitely something!"

They smiled in response to her cheers. At this point, Asuka suddenly asked:

"I heard that these Perytons are edible?"

"Of course! The meat of Perytons is quite similar to venison and is very delicious! Grilled, pickled or even processed into jerkies, they would taste great! These

Perytons will definitely be served for tonight's opening ceremony in various delicious cuisines!" Carol gesticulated happily but suddenly gazed towards the horizon where the sun was setting.

"Also…… During the battle with the huge dragon, half of the ingredients that we had originally prepared for the Harvest Festival were mostly destroyed or had turned bad. If we can't make use of all the game that all the various Communities caught or harvested to welcome everyone, it would be very disappointing. The results of this hunting event will surely lead to the success of the Harvest Festival……Hehe, I will let the guests have a taste of our very tasty dishes!"

Carol did a thumbs up, seemingly excited and happy.

Hearing Carol's words, Yō used her lips to bite her finger as she started to imagine the feast awaiting her arrival during the opening ceremony.

"Oh right…..If I remember correctly, tonight's opening ceremony is a buffet."

"Yep that's right, but Kasukabe-san, drooling is a little unsightly….."

Only then did Yō return to her senses and rub the trail from the corner of her mouth. An old fellow, sitting on the horse pull cart for transporting the Perytons, gave a wry smile as he watched them having fun. He's the Cat Elder, Garol Gundark. Garol shouted to them:

"Hey, the game has been loaded! Hop on!"

"Yes!" The trio answered in high spirits as they boarded the horse drawn cart.

However in the next moment--------the loud roars of beasts in their death throes came from a close distance within the forest.

"……Oh? Seems like someone caught a big one?"

Garol said heartily as he cracked the whip to hurry the horses.

Leaving the forest behind, they joined the trail of people down the road that led from the plateau to the game collection point. The horse driven cart jerked violently as it travelled on the uneven road that was seldom used and in disrepair. Even so, Asuka greatly enjoyed herself to the point of even laughing in joy for it was her first experience sitting on a horse cart.

"This kind of 'old gen' transport tool has it's own charm and feels interesting."

"Nn. Want one of these for [No Name]?"

Seeing Yō's nod in agreement, Garol's eyes lit up with a sparkle.

"If you require one, you can find us [Six Scars] to negotiate the trade anytime! We will even provide a friendship price and other special offers! Even now, we are also providing rental services for 'Hippocamp' drawn carts!"

"Rea…Really? That sounds great too."

Noticing how quickly the conversation became one about trade, Asuka couldn't help but give a wry smile. However, the thought of riding a horse cart on the water surface, wasn't a bad idea. If the upcoming Gift Game "Rider of Hippocamp" is interesting enough, having everyone together to sightsee would be quite a plan too.

"…..Will Kuro Usagi enjoy it? What do you think, Kasukabe-san?"

"I think it's not a bad idea. Let's classify it under Plan V and record it down."

"Nn!" Meeting each other's eyes, they nodded.

Puzzled, Garol tilted his head.

"Did something happen to Kuro Usagi-san?

"Oh, actually------"

Before Asuka could finish her words, the whole cart was tossed from the ground following a large explosion sound.

The goods were also airborne before violently crashing back onto the cart, and they were tossed up again twice more.

The suddenness of the situation had caused Asuka and Garol to jump up and clutch the back of their heads in pain as they had knocked it on the cart when their heads jerked backwards.

"Ouch…..! What…. What were those tremors?!"

"Yep, What was it? It felt like some huge object dropping on the ground."

Yō, the only one who managed to be in a prepared stance for battle peeked outside from the slits in the cart. But before she could make a confirmation of her observation, the driver of the horse cart, Garol, had started cheering.

"Oh, Oh Oooh! That's really amazing! It seems like the champion of the hunting event will not going to be us!"

"------What?" Asuka and Yō looked at each other.

Unable to ignore those words, they jumped out of the cart and went to see with their own eyes.

The sight that met their eyes was a mountain of carcasses, thirty over Perytons and twelve other man-eating eudemons, lying in the middle of the plateau having been struck down by a single strike.

"….. So you guys also joined."

The voice of a calm and composed woman travelled to Asuka and Yō's ears.

Both of them looked towards the source of the voice that was from a vantage point. That silhouette outlined against the light belonged to the mask knight Faceless.

Asuka looked up at her with a face of displeasure.

"Those are my thoughts exactly, Masked Knight-sama. I had thought that you wouldn't participate in this kind of barbaric Games."

"Nn, I did think of that……but it is part of my job to play along."

Saying that, Faceless lightly sighed. From her look, it would seem that she wasn't really willing in this matter.

Her reaction caused Asuka to be taken aback. Ever since the first day they met, Asuka had witnessed many impressive skills executed by this person and felt the transcendental airs exuded from her. Never did she expect to see this side of Faceless

Asuka's eyes continued to measure up Faceless, causing her to tilt her head in puzzlement.

" ….. Is there a matter?"

" No…. nothing."

Asuka frantically denied and turned her gaze elsewhere. But a seed of curiosity had already taken root in her.

Under that pure white armor and icy cold metal mask------ what kind of face is she hiding?

Garol was the first to break the awkward atmosphere as he remarked regretfully:

"Oh my~ That's quite impressive! That amount of game is at least five times of ours?"

"……Five times?"

Faceless once again cocked her head in astonishment to look towards the horse cart that belonged to Asuka and the others. And following that gaze, she gave a soft sigh and a displeased expression after she judged the amount of game that was held within.

Her reaction would really infuriate those who saw it. Asuka stepped forward to retort.

"Hey, wait! Upon seeing the result of other team's hard work, that kind of reaction, isn't it a wee bit too impolite?"

"…. Excuse me if I offended you. I actually thought that you guys would have caught more game than this."

Asuka and Yō were at an utter loss of words.

Faceless took out a Gift Card that stored all the game in a flash and started sprinting towards the other side of the hill.

Before disappearing over the hill, she had turned to look back once more….. but she had only done so to give a tired sigh.

Part 3

---- Underground city of [Underwood], Harvest Festival Vendors' Street.

After that incident, Asuka, Yō and Garol had gone to drop off their game at the collection point before proceeding to the [Underwood Underground City].

All those houses that were damaged beyond repairs have been demolished, while the entire city was being filled up by exhibitions and stalls. The remainder of the houses were at best hastily built shelters that would help shelter them from the winds and rain.

'Won't the nights here be quite tough?' Asuka cocked her head to one side as she spoke her mind.

Garol laughed heartily. "How is it so? This is common for the South. Anyways, when the Harvest Festival is in full swing, most of the people will party throughout the night and day, drinking their fill. No one will be bothered by such small details anymore."

" ……Really?" Displeasure crept into Asuka's icy voice.

Garol having felt the start of cold sweat beading his back quickly tried to change the topic to the hunting event's results.

"Oh…. Right, the performance by you girls for the hunting was quite good. [Six Scars] has also gotten into the top few, gaining us quite a bit of fame and honour."

Garol laughed happily as he bought Yakitori from the Street-side stall and handing them a stick each.

Asuka and Yō looked at each other. Unhappiness showing in their eyes.

"But……We still didn't get First Place."

Both of them pouted their lips sulkily.

In the end, [Will-O'-Wisp] had won as expected with an overwhelming difference in the scores compared to all the rest.

Ayesha had also participated in the hunting event. However, it would seem that ninety-nine percent of the points were accumulated by the game that Faceless brought back. Going about with that unenthusiastic attitude and yet continuing to obtain that score. She's truly the embodiment of a fearsome opponent.

Garol finished his stick of Yakitori before nodding his head in with a complex look on his face.

"The Favored servant of [Queen Halloween]…… If I remember correctly, her name is Faceless? Actually…. There's nothing for you to mope about. You guys have done your best and scored well. It's only that she's of a different existence."

"No. If only Garol-san hadn't imposed those restrictions upon us, we would definitely be victorious."

Yō retorted in a rarely used firm tone. And there was sufficient reason for her anger.

As a matter of fact, with the abilities of these two combined, bringing down dozens of Perytons and other aggressive eudemons would be a simple feat.

Even without using that kind of roundabout manner to herd and seal the movements, they would definitely be able to eliminate every single one of their targets. And the real reason for this disappointing result was due to the fact that they had extra restrictions from Garol binding their freedom aside from the game rules.

"Kasukabe-san can only utilize the Gift of the Griffons while I can only work with Mel. I know that Deen is in the midst of repairs and it would be pushing it to use him….. but even so, our total catch should be many times more than what we had obtained just now."

Asuka stared at Garol, displeasure evidently showing in her eyes.

After the battle with the huge dragon, both of them had asked Garol for guidance in regards to their newly obtained Gifts and abilities. Initially it was only Yō who asked for his help but Asuka had also followed her stead.

Garol's former appointment was that of [Floor Master] Draco Greif's strategist. Having heard of him being a well of knowledge, both of them had approached him to be their mentor. It is no wonder they felt unhappy since they could not see the results of their hard work paying off.

Even so, Garol continued to chew the yakitori in his mouth while looking at them indifferently.

"Listen up oujo-samas. The main force of a Community should never display their hand of cards. If at any point in time the opponents have seen the full extent of your capabilities, they will be sure to come up with a counter-plan. And when that time comes, it will be your Community's loss. The defense for your Community's home-ground would also be exposed. Don't you think my words sound reasonable?"

"……but------"

"Firstly, those who give their all for any kind of Game event are third rate players. Place your capabilities and Gifts on the Balance to measure them out before going into battles is what first class players would do. Especially for this hunting festival

which is more of a charity work than an actual battle, you guys being the main force should complete the task with only two to three percent of your actual strength."

Both of them were sullen. They understood the reasoning even though they didn't want to accept it.

Patting them on their shoulders, Garol consoled them:

"Listen up. The Game that's most important to you guys is [Hippocamp Rider]. Anything before that, you guys will have to rein in your full potential, or risk having nothing to compete with that Masked Rider."

"…. Hmph….. I know that."

Asuka turned away her face unhappily.

Garol shrugged his shoulders before turning away from them. "I still have some stuff to prepare before the opening ceremony, so I will be taking my leave…… Whatever you may say, you guys really did do your best in the hunting event. Remember to drop by [Six Scars]' stall later and I will try to compensate to you guys, so forgive me."

Garol gave a bitter smile as he left.

"…. Actually, I can grasp where Garol-san is coming from. After all if I use my full strength, I will be breaking more Gifts."

"Ah, Nn. Asuka's situation is special. And you rejected the offer to have a constant supply of free Gifts."

A depressed Asuka nodded her head. On her right hand was an antique looking hand-guard that was prepared by [Six Scars]. It was of a simple appearance but studded with many gems.

Lifting up her right hand to block out the skies, she sighed once more.

"To finally obtain a power that would help me get to Kasukabe-san and Izayoi-san's level with much difficulty……only to find out that it needs a large investment of funds to maintain the battle strength. It's the peak of irony." Cupping her downcast face in her hands, she muttered.

Several dozen types of Gifts have already been broken by her under the justification of [Forging the best Gift].

Being a Community that ranks around the first place in terms of commerce in the lower levels, [Six Scars] had offered to provide simple Gifts for free. Yet these Gifts were broken one after another, being unable to withstand her power. Feeling bad for having broken that many Gifts with her power, Asuka had decided to make the gift on her hand her last and politely declined the offer of a continuous supply of Gifts.

------"Cast aside your family, your friends, your possessions, your world and come to our Little Garden."

Having second thoughts about having cast away her wealth now, it felt like the most ironic thing ever!

"Though it's my responsibility alone, I still feel a little left out……From now on, I shall plan wisely before joining Gift games so as to prevent any unnecessary expenditures. After all, a set of Flame gemstones can even cost up to one copper."

"Nn. Yep. Tonight will mark the first step of your conservation plans……. Let's go! Let's walk while eating, shall we?"

"Eh?" Asuka's surprise escaped from her mouth when she registered the detail of that question.

God knows when she bought it but there were 2 freshly baked Apple Pies held in Yō's hands. Taking a large bite into the apple pie and spilling it's aroma into the surrounding air, a look of bliss came over Yō's face.

Asuka smiled wryly as she stretched out her hand. "Oh well, at least you were thoughtful today. So I will have one."

"Eh?"

"Hmmm?"

"Nn? I won't give it to you."

Stuffing her second apple pie into her mouth, Yō's face was one of bliss again.

Mustering her hot flushed cheeks, Asuka strode over to the stall and ordered three peach pies on an impulse. Though keeping her temper in check, she began to feast upon the pies in self-abandonment. Not caring about the upkeep of looks.

Relishing the remarkable harmony of the sour and sweet taste of peach that seemed to wrap around her tongue with each bite, Asuka felt her temple appeased when she remembered something.

"Oh right, Kasukabe-san, have you returned the headphones?"

Yō immediately started to cough as she choked on her food.

Asuka frowned as she understood the reason behind this over reaction.

"You haven't given it to him right?"

"…. Nn."

"About the matter of having broken his headphones?"

"That case is closed. He had forgiven me when I apologized. So quick was his reply that I almost couldn't believe my ears…… but….." Yō halted her words.

To replace the spoilt headphones, Yō had originally planned to summon her father's headphones to return to Izayoi. Though she lost it before, it was fortunate that she managed to find it once more on top of the rubble.

The replacement had the same flame logo that was seen on Izayoi's headphones. Hence Yō thought that she could use it to atone and be forgiven. Only that……

"I heard that his headphones wasn't a product that can be bought…. But a handmade item crafted by his friend…."

"……Is it so?"

At this point, Asuka realized the cause of her woes.

A handmade item when compared to a commercial product would often carry a different weight of feelings. If a replacement is simply acquired and given, it might get taken badly as an insult to Izayoi's friend.

(Eh? If…… If it's like this, something seems amiss. How would a handmade item carry the same logo found on a commercial product?) Asuka felt puzzled as she thought to herself.

Yō didn't seem to notice her concerns as she clenched her fists.

"And so I decided to keep the headphones as a keepsake of my father's possession and use something else to repay him. I already promised Izayoi that I will give him all the prizes that I gather from the Harvest Festival."

"Oh….like this…?"

"That's why I really wanted to get the first place for the Hunting event. That Garol-san just doesn't know how to be considerate of others." Yō stuffed more of her apple pie into her mouth as she sulked.

All of a sudden, her hand stopped moving. With a half-eaten apple pie held midway to the mouth, she widened her eyes as she fixed her eyed on something beside the stall.

Perplexed by her companion's strange actions, Asuka cocked her head to one side.

"Kasukabe-san? Is something the matter?"

"…….Asuka, what's that?"

Yō pointed before her with her free hand and Asuka's eyes followed the direction that Yō pointed……

Puck! went the sound of the collision between Asuka's forehead and something that was roughly the size of a fist.

"Aya!"

"Wua!"

"Ah, Asuka!"

Throwing aside her unfinished pie, Yō rushed to Asuka's side.

Fortunately it wasn't anything serious. Asuka only doubled over due to the surprise and force of the collision. Pressing the point swelling and angry looking bump on her forehead, she lifted up her head to look at the culprit that made that voice in a strange pitch.

The thing that collided with Asuka------ was a fist sized, faerie that was now seeing lots of stars.

"This…. This child is a faerie?"

"Seems smaller than Mel. It looks bite-sized."

"Right…. Want to eat?"

"I want to eat!"

"No you can't!"

Feeling the imminent threat to its life, the faerie quickly scrambled to its feet and brushed the dust off its Margenta silken outfit. Feeling a wave of déjà vu, Asuka gave a wry smile-----

Puck, Puck! A second and third collision went straight to her forehead.

"Yahahah!"

"Wuahah!"

"Waahah!"

"Serves your right♪"

Swish! The last one sent out a flying kick while shouting out maliciously. Asuka finally fell backwards with her back on the floor.

"Four? There's four of the same faerie?" Yō couldn't grasp the situation but she counted the number of those floating faeries.

There were a total of four faeries wearing the same Magenta High Grade silk one piece dresses. Looking like Mel, they seemed to be a type of group faerie. Floating around while squabbling amongst themselves, they flew away as though nothing had happened.

Yō with her mouth agape was too stunned to react as she watched them leave. At this moment, a familiar voice could be heard from over the crowd------it was the shop assistant of [Thousand Eyes]'s voice. Jostling against the crowd, she jogged over when she saw Yō and Asuka.

"Hah….Hah…. Y.You, the [No Name] people! Have you seen a five member group of faeries pass by her? They are small female faeries that wear Magenta one piece dresses!"

"Eh…. Nn…. Er, I did see them. Were they [Thousand Eyes] 's faeries?"

"No. They aren't faeries……Ah, That's not the point! Quick! Tell me where they have flown to!"

"They…. They have flown down that cliff towards the plaza below." Yō pointed at the huge plaza under the cliff.

The shop assistant stared to the bottom of the cliff with an angry glint in her eyes. At the same time, she grabbed Yō's sleeve.

"You can fly, can't you? Fly me over to catch them!"

"Wa… Wait a moment----"

"Kasukabe-san."

A hand grabbed Yō's shoulder from behind.

Yō quivered involuntarily as she turned back to face Asuka who was giving off a scary vibe with her eyes that denied any negotiations.

"A…Asuka?"

"…. We'll catch them, to the very last one of them."

Asuka, whose forehead was an angry patch of red, put her words down determinedly in a tone more serious than usual. For Asuka who had a strong self-esteem, she definitely wouldn't be able to swallow this disgrace of being hit on the forehead consecutively.

Understanding that there's no more room for discussion, Yō relented and grabbed their hands before taking a leap off the cliff together.

Part 4

----------[Underwood Great Tree] Conference Room, Evergreen Longhouse.

Moments after the end of the Hunting event, Jin Russel arrived at the conference room, prepared to discuss the terms of Alliance with [Six Scars].

Within the Evergreen Longhouse, the other party was nowhere in sight. Only Percher and a gloomy Shirayuki-hime stood to the right and left of Jin's back, dressed in their maid outfits.

"Wh,Why must I, Shirayuki wear this maid outfit and become subservient to others?"

"I advise you to give up soon. The clothes prepared by [Thousand Eyes] are of good quality and quite comfortable once you get used to it."

Percher, who had gotten used to her maid outfit, was leisurely poking fun at Shirayuki-hime.

----Originally loaned to [No Name] for the development of the waterways, Shirayuki-hime now had to extend her stay due to the uncompleted renovations of her temple.

Initially complaining and protesting "Who would wear such an outfit!", Shirayuki-hime had placed the maid outfit as the bet and played Gift games with Izayoi. Going at it for a hundred times, she had also lost to him a hundred times. In the end, she was almost forced to wear something so indecent that a pen couldn't possibly start to describe it. Hence her reluctant acceptance of the condition to wear a maid outfit as we see it today.

Although Kuro Usagi had specially obtained a maid outfit for Shirayuki-hime, one that was much more reserved and covering more adequately than the previous ones, for one that never wore a western skirt in her life, the outfit was totally strange and foreign.

"……How I miss my wafuku."

"Then wear it. Didn't you receive a wafuku in the set of clothes delivered to you?"

"That….That kind of obscene thing that exposes my shoulders, back, barely covering my chest and lastly showing off my legs, can't be called a wafuku! You aho!"

"Oh so you understand what is embarrassment? Aren't you sleeping naked all the time in your burrow in the form of a snake?"

"Hmph, you are totally incapable of understanding the difference in culture! And my real form isn't that of a snake but a sacrifice------"

--------*Tock Tock!* The doors of the Evergreen Longhouse was knocked twice.

Straightening his sitting posture, Jin warned his aides.

"Quieten down for now."

The wooden doors were slowly opening as the two shoved aside their squabbles.

Carol in a formal dress led the way in before stepping aside for the leader of [Six Scars].

The one that appeared in the doorway was a cat beastman that looked around the same age as Jin.

" ….. You are Jin Russel?"

"I am. And I assume that you are Garol Gundark's son------ Porol Gundark?"

Porol Gundark gave a casual wave in greeting before pushing his spectacles higher on his nose bridge..

The two sitting beside Jin relaxed their shoulders as their tension subsided.

(……. Just a kid?)

(Just like a youth… No, a young leader)

A crop of messy hair matched with round framed glasses, with a playful gleam that seems to shine in his eye whites that makes him look even younger than he already is. Only his dress code seemed appropriate for the occasion. In short, he looked more of a normal teen that was in his rebellious period.

(Since it's going to be a negotiation between two of the same age group, Jin shouldn't be pressed into a corner I guess…. This is going to be so boring.)

(I never thought that I would see a day when leaders, that carry the responsibility of their Communities, to be all children around the age of ten coming to the conference table. The end of the world must surely be near.)

Both of them silently came up with similar conclusions as they heard Jin introduce their entourage.



"These two beside me are the support staff of my Community. Percher, who is on my right and Shirayuki-hime on my left."

"I've heard of them. The MizuHeibi God and the reincarnation of Black Death. We of [Six Scars] have also played a part in the project of constructing the waterways."

"What did you say?" Shirayuki-hime gasped in surprise.

Porol sat himself down on the seat on the other end before laughing. Showing his sharp feral teeth.

"[Six Scars] is a Commerce Community. Do you think we would miss out on such a big scale construction when news of it reach our ears? Moreover it's also a supported project by one that is publicly acknowledged as the strongest [Floor Master], Shiroyasha, to provide for the lower levels. With the recent activity of Demon Lords, to have a 'peaceful and secure region' in this chaotic age is a huge advertisement. The price of land in the area will surely increase. I predict that the number of communities shifting to the East will also increase. Hence grabbing the opportunity, I've been having successful negotiations with the Communities that hold properties in the East…… It is with that in mind that you have sought me for negotiations right?"

Porol's face broke into a grin, watching Jin with eyes that were exceptionally white as his irises narrowed. Not replying immediately, Jin shifted his sitting posture and kept silent.

On the other hand, Porol's words had hit so close to home that it surprised Percher and Shirayukihime, causing them to turn and meet each other's eyes.

Having assumed that the other party would put forth all the disadvantages of the discussion, they were all ready to go on the defensive. None of them expected Porol to start off the negotiation by stating the value of [No Name]. And that would mean that this value must be part of the price to be given.

(So this means that…… his oratory skills in negotiations must have been seen as an important asset enough to be elected as the new leader.)

(Oh? This seems interesting…)

They could see that this youth wasn't the kind that would try to rush for benefits without much thought. Quietly chuckling in their hearts, they decided to observe the progress that had promised much entertainment for them, the audience.

Jin let the silence fill the room for a moment before assuming his usual unreliable smile to respond. "Nn, That is definitely the case. You saw through it?"

"There's nothing much for me to see through. This level is definitely easy enough even for my dim witted elder brothers to know."

"You have elder brothers?"

"Of course I do. I'm ranked twenty-fifth in terms of age amongst my father's twenty five children. Other than Carol Onee-san, I still have many other Onii-sans and Onee-sans that have a large age gap between us. Am I right?"

He turned to pass the question at Carol.

Carol who was obviously not used to this kind of formal conferences could only nod stiffly in response.

Hearing Porol's words, Jin continued to put on a smile while making a mental note to be more alert.

"That's quite something. For you to have twenty-four elder brothers and sisters…… yet being able to be the leader when you are the youngest."

Though his face was smiling, Jin's words implied another subtle message.

Porol seemed to have picked it up as he showed his feral grin: "Oh, it isn't much. My family's tradition places much emphasis on capability. Whenever it comes around to the time when the leadership is transferred to the next generation, an examination elimination game will be played amongst the candidates. And based from the scores, the best would be appointed as the next leader…… The Gift game is quite something as well. In normal circumstances with such a competition between siblings, one wouldn't be surprised if it were to lead to internal strife but due to the nature of Gift Games, it eliminates their rights to protest or revolt."

"! "

To be able to compete with the other candidates within the community for the family business and not worry about the threat of internal strife.

In addition to that, all other strong candidates will be stripped of their rights to protest and revolt.

Jin pondered over these conditions that would be stated in the Game.

"A game that acquires the support of the Community……while making the ones that lost sign a contract that swears fealty to the winner. Even if the winner is a younger sibling……"

"------or the child of a concubine."

Porol's words were sharper than before, but it wasn't one that held any worries or guilt.

A son of a concubine, added to being the youngest child in the age rankings to rise up as the new leader that leads the whole Community. The youth that now sat at the table was able to obtain his victory with such unfavorable conditions against him.

Percher and Shirayuki-hime who were taking him lightly had revised their thoughts and now watched him with eyes that acknowledged a formidable enemy.

Seeming to toss those words in his mind around a few more times, Jin nodded his head thrice before smiling with respect in his eyes.

"That's….. That's really impressive. Since you were able to garner so much support from your community, you should be quite acquainted with the intricacies of negotiations right?"

"Who knows? I will leave it to you to judge me later when the negotiations are over."

A smug smile befitting his age appeared on Porol's face. Realizing that this topic was closed, Jin leaned closer to the table to start on the main topic.

"……I guess you would already have heard from your father that we of [No Name] are trying to create an Alliance emblem and are in search of Alliance partners."

"That I've heard of. The emblem and flag that is required for rising up to the sixth level, to put it bluntly you want to make use of the name of my Community to form your Alliance right? And so with that as the price, what can you provide my Community in return?"

Laughing arrogantly, Porol seemed to be enjoying this rare conference with another Community leader of a similar age and held hopes for the discussions to come.

Keeping his silence for half a beat, Jin steered the discussion in a totally new direction.

"I would like to veer a little to another topic…… I believe that [Draco Greif] will be proposing a merger with you."

As the words fell, the smile was wiped off Porol's face.

"……That joke was quite humorous. Why do you think that way?"

"Because the Alliance hasn't been able to utilize itself efficiently. By separating people into their racial ethnicities and then into respective Communities, then further segregating by the racial differences into the specialized tasks. Take for example a Community that specializes in combat while another specializes in defending the city. Utilizing the strength of each Community….. Specialization of tasks for the racial groups. Though it sounds nice to be placed in the specialization program, it isn't necessarily as good as it sounds. Any Community that tries to leave the Alliance will spell the end of the pooled strength, leaving it vulnerable to attacks. After all, a Gift Game cannot be won through sheer strength alone."

"……"

"Since the past till now, the relation of the Alliance was maintained though frequent meetings between the independent Communities. However, the [Draco Greif] Alliance will soon be rising to the fifth level and most probably be the [Floor Master] as well. To get a better close knitted cooperation between the Communities, rather than an Alliance that comprises of independent Communities that have to juggle

with the many aspects to handle, there would be a need to become a more efficient Organization through the specialization of tasks……am I right to say so?"

Jin threw the question back to Porol.

Porol had mixed feelings of admiration and interest after listening to Jin's stand on the matter, though none of those made it to his facial expressions that maintained a calm demeanor.

(Hmm…… Seems like this isn't an information gathered from the other Community leaders.)

-----That's right. Jin's deductions were correct for the most parts, around 70%.

The [Draco Greif] Alliance's pending merger. About this matter, there was a gag order issued so he couldn't tell the truth but neither could he ignore the truth of Jin's words.

Facing the topic that focused upon the Alliance merger, Porol could already see what was hinted by the other party. Even in the face of such adversity, he decided to brave it by feigning ignorance and testing the confidence of the other party's deductions.

"Hey, your words seem to lack the logic to back them up. If you remember your previous words, supposing that the Alliance merger is true, there wouldn't be a reason for you to search us out for an Alliance proposal anymore, would there?"

"Because all the other Communities except for [Six Scars] would join the Alliance merger."

Jin seemed eager to tear apart the defenses upon seeing a chink in the opponent's armor as he continued. "[Six Scars] is different from the other Communities. Being

specialized in the economical aspect and having the huge resource in finance, you are able to reach out to the other realms to expand your business. Most importantly, to cause a Commerce Community to change their 'flag' and 'Name' would deal a huge blow to your current business. Rather than letting it happen, you would choose to opt out of the merger and continue the task of hoarding your treasury while making use of the relations with [Draco Greif]. This will then enable you to even out the gains and losses……right?"

(Wow! That was impressive.)

Other than that ending that seemed to suggest doubts in his own conjecture, Jin could easily be given a full score for his argument. Since this was brought up by the [No Name]'s before the focus of the discussion today, it would seem that their price can only be related to this.

Softening his attitude, Porol gave a smile.

"So that's the case. *KeKe* If you put it like this, I will not peek around the bush any further. That is to say that [No Name] promises to make up for our loss from not joining the [Draco Greif] Alliance? To utilize the effect of our [Privilege of an Alliance] to lend your strength in future fights that we may have with Demon Lords……am I right to say so?"

"Yes."

Jin replied immediately. Watching this sudden turn of events, Shirayuki-hime couldn't keep silent any further:

"Wait, wait a while you brat! Did you really hear what he said clearly? He asked for our guaranteed participation in any battle with Demon Lords! It's to say that even if

the opponent is an Asura god, no matter the situation be it good or bad, you will have to lend a hand! If it is just to borrow the Community's name, it's too high a price."

"Ho…. So our flag and name is that unworthy?"

Porol grabbed the chance to make the fan the situation further, not wanting to back down.

At that, Shirayuki-hime just stared back at him angrily but kept silent.

----How the [Privilege of an Alliance] works is when a Demon Lord attacks an Alliance Community, though the other Communities in the Alliance may not have met the requirements of the Game, they can forcefully join in the fray with that Privilege.

There's no obligation to help even if there's an Alliance. Though it may not sound ethical, to risk one's own Community to help another would be a very bad leadership quality. Hence one would usually assess the situation, strength of the opponent and the winning conditions before deciding whether or not to participate. The might of Demon Lords are comparable to the tragedies of Natural disasters. There's none in Little Garden who wouldn't fear them.

And this Alliance is to be formed with the contract of [Our strength will be lent regardless of the Demon Lord's power].

Jin motioned Shirayuki-hime to back down as he leaned out further.

"The only problem is that battles with Demon Lords are very exhausting in nature. Though my comrades are the ikkitousen power type players, they would also incur lots of costs in the Game. With this aspect in mind, I would like to ask [Six Scars] to provide us with assistance."

"Okay, I understand. Just ask if you need anything."

Porol gave an exaggerated action of leaning back while making that promise. Regarding [No Name]'s battle strength, he had evaluated and rated them highly. If all these expenses were to guarantee their support in a battle with a Demon Lord, it was still a cheap investment.

[Six Scars] providing items and money.

[No Name] sacrificing their blood and lives on the front lines.

……but this seemed like a contract of a sell-sword mercenary or that of a slave. The maid combination glared at Jin's back with disappointment and anger.

(…… Following the earlier progress, we should have been able to ask for a better condition)

(In the end it's still the ignorance of the child….)

The ones who will bleed and seat isn't the leader Jin, but the three problem kids that are the main members of the Community. If they hear of this condition for the Alliance, they would surely have a gulf in their relationship with Jin.

In their minds, they were already groaning at this predicament.

However, Jin only glanced at them from the sides of his eyes before continuing the negotiations.

"Then, can I seek to confirm the details that you will support us with?"

"Hahaha, you sure are impatient…… But it's no problem. Let's hear it then, what you have decided to request from us? Is it money? Weapons? Or Gifts for battle purposes?"

"I would like to request manpower."

"------What?" Porol's voice came out a little higher in pitch.

"Ah. No. I didn't mean to ask for manpower for the sake of playing Games. Since we are going to run our Community, we would be needing a lot more comrades to lend a hand. I hope that you would be able to provide a sufficient amount of manpower for our cause." Jin quickly added.

"….. Manpower? And roughly how many would that be?"

"At least two hundred."

Porol frowned in surprise.

From what he gathered so far, [No Name] is supposedly a Community that emphasizes on its main member's battle prowess. Though news was that they were developing their farm, the premises of their farm wouldn't explain the need for that much manpower.

What would they require the manpower for then?-------Porol racked his brains and remembered another matter.

(Come to think about it……the [No Name]s will be getting back their land and facilities after rising up to the sixth level….. could their aim be that?)

Though he had found a clue to the answer, he still clicked his tongue.

The [No Name] Community that Jin now led was one of the best Communities in the East Sector. Assuming that they want to rise up to the sixth level to reclaim their possessions, how much value would those possessions be?

(And it wasn't a matter of one or two people but a large amount of manpower……No, it would be more correct to put it as pricey enough to be willing to pit themselves against Demon Lords. If it really is so…..)

In the end, it was becoming more difficult to tell which of the two of them was trying to get a better bargain. Sadly, there was no way for Porol to measure these insubstantial conditions with a Balance. What he thirsted for now was for more information.

"…… I have no objections about sending my comrades to help you as the manpower requested. However, being the leader of the Community, I wouldn't like to be kept in the dark regarding the reason for sending my men there."

This was the almost the utmost limit for probing into the matters of others. It would be the best case scenario if Jin were to be willing to reveal the purpose. If he changed the topic, Porol would just have to accept it. But if it's the worst case that Jin decides to stop the negotiations, Porol would have to apologize to find a common point to agree on again. After all, the negotiations up till now had definitely been quite favorable to his Community.

Hence to respect each other's perimeter of the common point, Porol decided to phrase it carefully.

But to Porol's amazement, Jin had readily agreed and turned to ask Percher:

"……Percher, could you pass that bag to me?"

"Eh? Oh, okay."

Percher who was listening to their conversation intently was surprised by this sudden focus on her as she was being addressed.

From the bag that was handed over to him, Jin retrieved a tightly sealed box and a thick stack of old goatskin parchment. Opening the lid to allow the sparking metal ore roughly the size of a human skull to be visible, Jin passed both over to Porol for inspection.

Percher and Shirayuki-hime couldn't make anything out of this action and looked at each other quizzically.

However, Porol was able to understand the value of that object. Grabbing the goatskin parchments as his face paled, he stood up hurriedly.

"…….Wait! No Way! Give me a moment! This….. No matter how you put it, it is totally unbelievable!"

Porol couldn't help but shout loudly while rapidly scanning the documents with his eyes.

The old goatskin parchments mapped out a vein of ore running through a mountain and the estimated amount of ore obtainable from mining it.

When placed beside the metals like Gold, Silver and Bronze, those would definitely pale in value and be regarded as rotten old trash.

Be it in Heaven, or the Human Realm, the Ore described in the goatskin just held that much value that it cannot possibly be measured.

Seeing that Porol understood the full value of the item, he made the final confirmation of Porol's thoughts.

"--------'That is the vein of [Diamond Iron]. Our aim is mining the [Terramaterial] that condenses in the Community grounds."

Chapter 2

--- [Underwood] Harvest Festival, Kitchen VII

Beside the plaza allocated for holding the opening ceremony, a mountain of ingredients was forming from the generous amount of game and other donated ingredients. Those that wished to put their culinary skills to good use bustled around the pile, and were free to take what they needed to flaunt the harmony of flavors from their own recipes.

Having left the Great Tree, Izayoi and Kuro Usagi could smell the aromas of the cuisines that wafted in the air, making them a little drunk in the scent and start wandering around the laid out tables.

“Wow…… That’s quite a lot of food stalls. My original plan was to take over all the stalls in the area but this is a little overwhelming. And to make them all submissive to myself through sheer violence would be an unforgivable humiliation…...!”

“Erm….. You needn’t force yourself to eat them all.”

“No! That would be so wrong. If I’m so easily defeated by the stalls of this world, I would be disappointing the people who used to call me by the name of ‘Matsuri Tornado’. Though it’s such a waste to give up on my one day plan, I will show you that it can be done in three!”

A challenging glint was in his eyes as he gazed around at the crowd of stalls around him.

Just then, Lily’s voice could be heard coming from the number seventh Kitchen at the plaza’s corner.

“This voice…… Lily?”

Thinking about it, Kirino did mention about the senior group helping out with the Harvest Festival preparations. Setting aside their conversation, Kuro Usagi and Izayoi moved towards the source of the voice.

Lily should be in the kitchen preparing the feast and the fragrance of her meticulously prepared dishes wafted towards them. As they neared the kitchen, a happy but slightly off tune song could also be heard coming from there.

“Stewed Vege~ Stewed Vege~ Flavorful Stewed Vege♪ Combining them and Stirring them ~ The better it will be~ Such a joy it is♪”

“Yep.”

“Ya!” Lily gave a little gasp in surprise as she turned to look behind her.

It was Izayoi and Kuro Usagi who were behind her. A mischievous grin hung on Izayoi’s face while Kuro Usagi just smiled as she stood beside him.

Swishing her two tails in embarrassment, with her face blushing and spreading up to the tips of her fox ears, part of her embarrassment turned into anger.

“That’s… That’s horrid! Eavesdropping on others is not good!”

“Yep. That is why we just have to do it openly.”

“Yes ~♪”

Lily could only pout as they teased her.

Curious about the dish that Lily was stirring earlier, Izayoi helped himself with it on a small sauce plate.

"……Quite a unique taste. What spices did you add in it?"

"Eh? Ah…. This is the meat obtained from the Hunting event. To remove the strong smell of the meat that might put some people off, I added Vanilla. Since I heard that it is very similar to venison, I decided to use it in a stew where the meat can be boiled to a suitable tenderness before mixing other vegetables in as a vegetable stew for everyone. I also heard that deers are seen to be sacred animals in the South and that it will bless the person that consumes it."

"Oh…deers huh?…."

"YES! ♪ The South has a tradition in the Harvest Festival that sees all horned beasts as sacred. Besides the Harvest festival, goats, water buffaloes, and deers are just as valuable in other Matsuri s." Kuro Usagi gave a thumbs up as she added.

A second later, the sounds of an orchestra performance started up from the plaza.

The piece that has its main focus on the stringed instruments was accompanied by the beat of drums and harmonized with the flute as it slowly built up in volume. Noticing the variation of the piece, he pieced two and two together and nodded his head in sudden understanding.

"The tradition to see horned animals as sacred and this particular type of music variation…...I get it now. In other words, the South has been largely influenced by Irish culture."

"YES! Though it still depends on the region, it is right to say that [Underwood] and the [Draco Greif] Alliance is very much influenced as seen from their views of judging strength based on the presence of horns."

"There's a Harvest Festival hosted by Inari Okami in the East too. A letter of invitation would always arrive for my Oka-san."

"Oh? The South doesn't hold that festival?"

"Nn….. That's right. Since the staple food in the South is not rice but corn and other grains. The method of worship is also different. Even if it was held here, no one would attend it."

"Oh, I see..." Izayoi nodded as he understood.

---In the realm of grains, the most commonly cultivated are rice, wheat and corn.

As the climate determines the amount of harvest for each type of grain, the grain that grows best in each region would then determine the type of deity that the people would devote themselves to. If a festival were to be held in a region that had less devotees, it would just result in embarrassing that deity on another's home ground.

"Come to think about it, Little Garden is quite filled with drama isn't it? After enjoying this Harvest Festival, I would also look forward to joining the Matsuri of Inari Okami." Izayoi laughed heartily though his reason for looking forward to the event wasn't for personal entertainment but for the promise that he had made with Lily.

As his gaze shifted to the heap of dishes prepared and waiting on the table, Izayoi seemed to remember about something.

"Oh right. The ingredients over there, can I take them even if it's uncooked?"

"Eh?"

"What do you mean by that?"

“I just thought of the idiot who got himself so injured in the previous battle that he can’t join in the fun at the Harvest Festival. So I’m thinking of consoling him with one of those game.” Izayoi laughed lightly.

However, Kuro Usagi’s reaction was quite the opposite as she shifted her gaze downwards.

“That person you are talking about…. Is it about Gry-san?”

“Yep. He said that he liked the taste of venison and horse. So I will make him regret having skipped out on this Harvest Festival.” And with that, Izayoi started walking over to the pile of ingredients.

Kuro Usagi gave Lily a significant look before chasing after Izayoi.

“Gry-san’s condition is quite bad isn’t it?”

“Nope, his life is out of the danger. And he’s already recovered to the point of regaining his mobility.”

“That...That sounds good!”

“Nn. Actually, the wings of a gryphon are just a leftover from the evolution process and is similar to the tail bone that humans have. Even without them, the gryphons can still fly. So he says not to worry.”

“……”

Izayoi laughed loudly without a change in his behavior that would say otherwise. His words should be the truth. Gryphons had the ability to control the turbulence in the air and step on it like solid ground. Hence, making their wings an extra accessory.

However, the loss of wings for a Gryphon is a fatal flaw. Because the lion is traditionally considered the king of the beasts and the eagle the king of birds, the Gryphon is seen as an especially powerful and majestic creature, leading them to be very proud of themselves.

To be in this state would definitely be a huge blow to his pride, causing him to want to hide from the crowd.

Kuro Usagi was racking her brains trying to figure out a way to console the two who were treating each other with much consideration when Izayoi turned back to her without a trace of worry in his eyes. "……Don't fret over nothing. It's not like we can't salvage the situation."

"EH?"

"Though I haven't found the exact method, it would be strange if we can't find one or two gods that can help to treat amputations in Little Garden where all the gods gather right?.....I may not know where to find them yet but I did say that I will take responsibility till it is accomplished. So I will also put in my effort to find them."

Though his words sounded very casual, his determination could be seen from his eyes. It was as though he had just made an oath.

For a person who had such an attitude, sympathy would be an insult.

Hence Kuro Usagi decided to resume her lively self as she replied. "Since it is like this, Kuro Usagi will help too!"

"Oh? Do you have some leads?"

“YES! Kuro Usagi is a prestigious [Highborn of Little Garden]! And would definitely know one or two famous doctors!”

With a look that said leave it to me, she thrust her chest out proudly. Izayoi only nodded without making fun of her.

They arrived at the huge table that was covered by a mountain of ingredients and rolled up their sleeves getting ready to load into a sack that they brought along with them.

“Okay! Let’s just grab a load of food for him!”

“YES! To celebrate his fast recovery, let’s bring him more!”

“Well, let’s take a deer first…?”

“Uwa! Izayoi-san Look Out!”

Having stretched out his hand to take a nicely sliced chunk of meat, Izayoi snorted as he turned to look behind him. Only to see a faerie roughly the size of a fist swooping towards his face.

Pak! He slapped it once.

“Slapped into the sky? Slapped down? It’s dead right?! What did you just slap, Izayoi-sanNNNNNNN!”

“Just take it that you didn’t see anything.”

“O…okay….”

“Alrighty! Let’s just grab a load of food for him!”

“YES! To celebrate his fast recovery, let’s bring him more!”

"Well, let's take a deer first…?"

"Uwa! Izayoi-san Look Out!"

Having stretched out his hand to take a nicely sliced chunk of meat, Izayoi snorted as he turned to look behind him. Only to see three more faeries roughly the size of a fist swooping towards his face----.

PakPakPak!------ He executed a consecutive slap with his palm.

"Wa! Where did you slap them to? It sounded like you flattened a few more this time! What did you just slap, Izayoi-sanNNNNNNN!"

"Just take it that you didn't see anything."

"Okay---- Did you expect that to work? You tried that tactic once already! You Baka!"

Swish! Her paper fan came down.

Izayoi also realized how forced it was to use the same tactic twice in succession but he reluctantly displayed the faeries before Kuro Usagi.

"Oh please. Why would I kill them without reason? I just snatched them from the air and chucked them into the sack."

"Need…Needless to say, I already know that!"

Peeking into the sack that was filled with meat, Kuro Usagi saw four unconscious faeries lying inside that were now seeing stars while making sounds of "Ugu….". Picking one up to take a closer look, Kuro Usagi's gaze became serious.

"……EH? They aren't faeries."

"Oh?"

"This…… Could it be [Laplace Little Demons]? No way! Why would the top of Laplace come to …."

Before she could even finish her words of "this level", the music had stopped and the noise around them had quietened somewhat. Kuro Usagi realized that the opening ceremony preparations were complete and hurriedly looked towards the stage that was carved into the middle portion of the cliff's face.

Only to see the Alliance leader who still had her broken dragon horn wrapped in bandages------Sarah Doltrake already on the stage.

Looking at the sky to confirm the time with the stars, Kuro Usagi panicked.

"Oh no! This is bad! I had promised Sala-sama and Shiroyasha-sama to be the MC for the opening ceremony!"

"Nn? Shiroyasha will be here too?"

"YES! I need to hurry over….. Any….Anyways, Please make sure to keep those little demons secured, Izayoi-san!"

"Got it~" Izayoi said as he waved goodbye to her.

Perking her rabbit ears straight up, Kuro Usagi started dashing towards the plaza of the opening ceremony.

Chapter 3

----------[Underwood Great Tree] Conference Room, Dark Evergreen Longhouse.

Porol has since reread the contents of the goatskin parchments thrice. This is because the estimated haul obtainable from the mine didn't match his knowledge of Diamond Iron mines. It was so large a territory that it was out of the usual estimates.

(Terramaterial….refers to the minerals that would be in the same category as 'Aether Crystals' or 'Orichalcum' which are at the top of the list. Even within the best of the domain of lands blessed by Gods, it is not improbable for it to take many hundreds of years to develop a vein of Terramaterial. It's the rarest and most precious metal in existence!)

The Terramaterial that Jin Russel had mentioned----[Diamond Iron Ore] is at the top of the list in terms of its hardness index. Even so, that wasn't the most amazing part about its characteristics.

[Diamond Iron]'s characteristic is the ability to retain its hardness while being incorporated with other Gifts.

Take for example, the armor and weapons that [Perseus] had used against the [No Name] in the past were all made from the smelting of [Diamond Iron Ore].

Seeing how pale Porol had become, Carol was worried for him. However, she was also feeling the start of cold sweat on her back too.

"B…But Porol, wouldn't it be too hasty to believe it just by these documents…..?"

"Carol Onee-san I would agree….. If I were just to judge from these maps and documents, I would have doubted it…..But didn't you hear of the recent mass production by [Perseus] to replicate their Community's symbolic equipment? It shouldn't have been possible to do that…. However, if they had hidden such a huge mine….. things would really match up!"

-----Endowing the protection from the domain of Hades: the cap of invisibility aidos kyneê.

-----Endowed with the ability of flight by the Olympian god Hermes: Winged sandals of Hermes.

It was rumored that the reason why [Perseus] managed to rise as part of the cadre of [Thousand Eyes] is due to the successful mass replication of those two Gifts.

Though the Harpe that sealed the Celestial Spirit Algor was also forged from the ore of [Diamond Iron], there should be a reason that obstructs the mass production of Harpes with sealing properties.

Porol felt chilled to the spine as he realized.

It's possible to recreate all the weapons and armors of legends with that amount of ore available in the mines!

(If the [No Name]s had continued to run themselves within their periphery, the biggest trading partner would only be [Thousand Eyes]. And it would be sure to flow within the organization through that route…..!)

To begin with, the ability ‘to manufacture replicas of godly-blessed equipments’ is already a miracle in itself.

The method of production couldn’t have appeared without some trade secrets or secret mechanisms. Even if they were replicas, the Gift still required a miracle from God to be planted in it.

“However, the thing that makes it so difficult to accept isn’t that. I want to know what had been done to cause such a great amount of that mineral to run so conveniently under one spot. If the quantity estimated by those documents are true----It can easily cover the surface of [Underwood] and be in excess.” Placing all the documents and maps about the mining process down on the table, Porol looked Jin straight in the eye.

“About that, I’m not obliged to answer.” Jin replied without hesitation. The tone within his words was an obvious refusal and Porol had no choice but to let it go. After all, the table of the negotiations have been totally turned to Jin’s favor.

The focus of the negotiations had been in regards to the price that the [No Name]s are willing to give since the start of the discussion. However, it was evident that the focus has changed to how much support [Six Scars] can offer in terms of financial and manpower.

And that was the power of the mine. It was so important that if Porol had let slip this opportunity, the ones affected would be much more than just [No Name] and [Six Scars].

It was a gold mine that could tip the balance in power between the East and the South in an instant.

(Intervening in every Demon Lord game….. Should I remove that condition and call it quits?.... No! That would be bad! If I gave in now, it would give them the advantage of being equals even in future negotiations!)

In this situation, it was even likely that they may cancel their previous offer.

Hence the only option would be to wait for the decision to come from the [No Name]'s side. Porol had much confidence that if he withdrew his previous condition on the [No Name], Jin would reply: "---How much support are you willing to offer?" while smiling in that unreliable way of his.

If he couldn't find a way to rebuke that line, it would become the chance for the other party to take the lead. Putting aside the fact that this was a huge opportunity for his Community to profit from, Porol still wanted to prevent any situation that might cause him to lose the lead in the negotiations.

"……I get it now. I finally understand why you required a force of two hundred as manpower. However, this would seem a little insincere of us. If you wish to, I can help to market the [Diamond Iron] ore------"

"There's no need for you to feel bad about this. Our request is only for [Six Scars] to provide the manpower."

"…..But, Jin Russel. Hearing from your words, it would seem that you do not understand the value of this ore. Be it Gold, Silver or Precious Stones, selling it raw and unprocessed will cause its price to be suppressed. Hence in trade, trust and accomplishments are necessary as a brand name. The current connections that we have today would be sure to guarantee a huge profit margin. Maybe we could also

ask the up and coming next [Floor Master], the [Draco Greif] Alliance for a contract……"

"No, We aren't planning to sell the raw materials…. Ah, I apologize for allowing such a misunderstanding to occur, since I should have explained earlier." Saying that, Jin took a letter out from his leather bag.

Recognizing the symbol on the wax sealing, Porol's expression froze in place.

"That's…That's [Will-O'-Wisp]'s emblem….!"

"Yes it is. They have already signed an Alliance contract with us [No Name]. This particular Community has quite an impressive smelting skill amongst the lower levels. Have you seen the silver candlestick rack that they put up for display during the [Rise of the Fire Dragon] festival?"

"N…No…. But I heard that they won the best craftsmanship award."

"Yes, that is indeed a remarkable achievement. Having acknowledged their skill, we had decided to entrust them with the task of refining the [Diamond Iron Ore], and smelting them into equipment before sending it into the market. After all, [Will-O'-Wisp] has already made themselves a brand name."

(I already knew that!) Porol complained in his heart.

Word was that the youngest [Floor Master] Sandra Doltrake, who was quite a topic for many, had much praise for [Will-O'-Wisp] and had ordered many household necessities from them.

By mentioning that the equipments were crafted by the rising star Community [Will-O'-Wisp], orders would immediately flood in.

Though grudgingly, he had to admit that it was indeed much better a brand name than [Six Scars].

"……"

Even if Porol decided to offer more economic support, there would not be any benefits in return. Since the other party had already placed all that they can offer on the scales for negotiation----the lives of their comrades.

It is precisely because of that, that Porol had offered "free financial support in regards to Gifts and daily necessities". If he changed his condition to "We will provide you with economic support for a share in the profits", that would be a blatant disrespect to the people who were willing to place their lives on the scales and result in an unbridgeable rift in their negotiations.

That youth wouldn't be that gullible to accept an Alliance that devalued the lives of his comrades.

Porol gave it more thought for three minutes-----Before he let out a long sigh that seemed to flag his defeat.

"….AH~! Damn it! I've lost! Jin Russel! I will accept all the conditions that you've proposed, so just let me have a small portion to call dibs, you bastard"

"Po…Porol….!"

"I'm sorry, Carol onee-san, our opponent has played one too many good cards and most likely come prepared, having taken control of the situation very well. I really am out of tricks……my only regret is not having heard news about the [Diamond Iron Ore], which I would have offered more in return. However, if the situation is

left like what it is currently, I'm afraid the juiciest meat will be in the mouths of others."

As though his strength was drained, Porol slid back into his seat and rested on its back.

Jin also relaxed his shoulders. "Though you say that, this information is such a confidential matter that only two other trusted members know of it. Even those two behind me are totally in the dark about it……To tell the truth, their gazes have been piercing me this whole time."

Turning his head back gingerly, Jin faced the two behind him who had their mouths left half open while observing the situation's progress. They must have been unable to foresee that Jin---No, that the Community they belonged to had such a hidden talent. Lifting the sides of her lips, Percher managed to force a smile.

"No wonder that Freak of a boy decided to leave this all to you. After all, the basic haggling in negotiations isn't even necessary. Just from the success of keeping the information a secret, Jin had already gotten an assured victory."

"Nn. Whatever others might say, it was quite entertaining, leader-sama." Shirayuki-hime seemed to have the burden off her shoulders as she sighed in relief and relaxed.

Hearing their praises, Jin gave a wry smile as he felt comforted by their words.

Porol leaned forward.

"…..Hey, tell me. Why didn't you place the focus on the battle with the huge dragon?" A trace of tension could be felt in his voice.

"What does that mean?"

"There's no need to keep up the pretense. The news that it was [No Name] that defeated the huge dragon is known throughout the [Draco Greif] Alliance. I had thought that you would focus on your accomplishments at the conference."

-----For example [We saved your lives from the palm of the Demon Lord, so you should form an Alliance with us] along those lines.

Porol had been wary and on the lookout for those lines.

Saving others from a Demon Lord's battle game is definitely a matter that deserves gratitude. However if the [No Name]s had used that as a debt to be repaid, it would be intolerable and unacceptable.

However to reject it in a wrong way and cause the news of the Alliance request rejection to get out in the wrong way, they would be seen to be an ungrateful lot.

A Combat specialized Community having saved the Commerce Specialized Community usually sank into such a complicated relationship.

"But you didn't choose that method…. Why? Was it pride that forbade you from committing such an act?"

Porol's words had no deeper meaning and neither did it carry any grudges against Jin's strategy. It was purely out of curiosity as to the reason why his opponent did not choose the method which he was so guarded against.

Seeing it plainly on Porol's face, Jin replied with a question: "I ……May I call you Porol directly?"

"Eh? Yeah, sure. I already called you by name already by the way."

"Nn. Having been on guard against me if I decided to use the gratitude vote, Porol must have planned many counters to that right?"

"Of course I did. I prepared forty eight counter plans----Okay, that was just a joke. But I did have some cards up my sleeve to counter that move. Is there a problem with that?"

Porol frowned in surprise though he may have also felt a little underestimated.

Instead, Jin laughed heartily.

"----Precisely. Since I know that that strike would be bounced away, what use is there for the treasured sword? Hence from the start, this bout of negotiation had an unspoken rule that I had to follow. And that is 'To win without depending on the gratitude you may have'."

Hearing that, Porol's eyes grew big and round and blinked before it was his turn to burst into a loud laugh while slapping his knees.

"Haha! So that's how it is! Jin already guessed that I would come up with a few counter strategies."

"No. It is I believe you would do the preparation. I assume that the other party whom I approach to be my Alliance partner will at least be able to do that much. Or else, it would be quite a bother."

These words caused Porol to laugh more heartily.

"Okay, got it! Since you think so highly of [Six Scars], to continue to cut edges would be a blemish to our name! We will provide assistance to the best that we can. But for the investment and the dispatching of manpower, we would like to walk the

grounds first to determine the estimates before we can proceed. Moreover, we need to draw up the estimated revenue and other matters. But in view of the opening ceremony that would be starting soon, let's end it with the agreement to the Alliance. Would that be fine, Jin?"

"Yes. I will be in your care, Porol."

The two youths, leaders of the Alliance shaked hands solemnly. Porol then stood up, stretching his body at the same time.

"Good! Today will be the first day of the Alliance between us. If you are free, I can be your host for the Harvest Festival. Those two behind you must be hungry as well already. Especially that one with of a shorter stature seems to be in her stage of puberty." Though Porol tried to tease her, Percher pretended not to hear it and ignored him.

"Oh, right. Please introduce me to the people of [Will-O'-Wisp] next time."

"Okay, a trade deal?"

"No, it's to give personal thanks. Because my dad had been in the care of Jack----."

His words broke off.

Porol's expression became serious as he seemed to repeat the words he just said in his mind.

"----Crap! No wonder I've lost. Only focusing on the negotiations, I actually forgot the most important matter." Maintaining his seriousness, he turned back to face the trio and looked at them in turn.

"Eh?"

Those words weren't aimed at anyone but as a warning for himself.

Steadying his gaze on the [No Name]s,

"---Jin Russel and the two aides of his, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for saving my comrades of [Six Scars] from the grasp of the Demon Lord. As long as [Six Scars] continues to exist, we will never forget this debt."

The serious and sincere gaze from his eyes weren't that of a common youth expressing his gratitude.

"……Please forgive my faux pas. Being the newly appointed leader, the first thing I should do should be to express my thanks."

"Don't take it too hard on yourself, you needn't worry about it. However, if you really want to thank, then you should say it to them, those comrades of mine."

"Got it. I will be sure to thank them personally…… Oh right. Jin's comrades are quite something aren't they?"

That question carried the curiosity of a normal youth having seen a strong hero.

"Of course. They are the pride of [No Name]. One of the top few players in the East." Jin replied with confidence.

"Oh Ho….. If compared to my Shifu, who do you think is stronger?"

"Shifu? Porol has a Shifu?"

“Nn. I heard that he had gone into recluse to meditate and didn’t make it for the Harvest Festival -----Hnghng~ I think you would at least hear of the name of my Shifu before, after all he is the famous Ja,,,”

Suddenly, a person pushed kicked the door and rushed into the room, panting heavily.

While wiping off the sweat that beaded her forehead, the Tora mimi Kemono girl, who just rushed in, took in the sight of the Evergreen Longhouse interior.

“Ex..Excuse me! Is Jin Russel-sama here?”

“Eh? Oh, that’s me. Jin Russel”

“Please proceed to the plaza immediately! We aren’t able to control them anymore! May Jin-sama go and stop them personally as the leader!”

“….Don’t tell me….” Jin’s face immediately paled.

Shirayuki-hime also backed away having felt a very bad omen about this news.

Percher was the only one who felt that this sounded like fun as she smiled slyly.

“Ma,May .. I ask what is happening at the plaza?” Jin asked stutteringly.

The Tora mimi Kemono girl took a deep breath.

“In the opening ceremony of the Harvest Festival, some [No Name] members and the leader of [Two Wings]-----Griffith-sama the Hippogriff, seemed to have some kind of dispute----- the situation is now very tense! If we let it continue, both Communities will be starting a fight----!”

Chapter 4

Part 1

---[Underwood] Harvest Festival, Plaza at the Lowest level

Moments before the start of the opening ceremony.

The orangey hues of the sky had subsided. While the curtains of night were drawn across the Great Tree City.

The burning bonfire illuminated the city, seeming to be the signal for the banquet to come.

The residents of the Great Tree were in high spirits though the reason is definitely more than just their nocturnal habits in full swing at these hours.

The time to serve up all the fruits and game collected since the previous night had finally arrived. And that, should be the main reason.

Meat that have been skewed and grilled to aromatic perfection, fragrant smelling fruits that were juicy and sweet, and there were even some who brought out their own home-brewed beer to toast with others. It wouldn't be too far off the target to say that this moment was the splendor and essence of the Harvest Festival.

The atmosphere allowed participants to step out of their usual boundaries and mingle with others of different Communities. Stories were shared over wood carved beer mugs as they were refilling them with rum.

Kasukabe Yō kept looking longingly at the banquet that seemed to be demanding her attention as she carried two passengers in flight.

"A…Asuka, that. That buffet has already started…Isn't it time for us to give up? Can you smell it? The fragrance of grilled corn----"

"That thing can wait! We must catch those little brats!"

"That's right! I won't be able to accomplish the task that Shiroyasha-sama tasked to me if I can't catch them……Anyways, just find them quickly!"

Asuka and the female shop assistant nastily agreed to keep Yō away from the enticing food below.

Whatever they may say, the task of finding those small little faeries from such a height was much more difficult than climbing into the sky.

In this situation, the only hope was to rely on Yō's acute sense of smell. However….

(…. I'm hungry….)

Yō's tummy was rumbling in protest. Though on the verge of losing to the temptation, Yō continued to search the surroundings with much discipline.

Down below, the opening ceremony was progressing smoothly and the banquet was entering its climax.

Yō who looked forward to the buffet more than anyone else in [No Name], could only call the current situation that she was trapped in a punishment.

Just as a dejected Yō was going to accept the sudden drudgery imposed upon her, she caught a scent of someone.

(This scent……Izayoi?)

She turned her head towards the source of the scent to see Izayoi, who carried a sack, and Lily happily enjoying their meal.

“---Asuka.”

“What? Found them?”

“I can’t fly anymore. I’m going down.”

“….Eh?!” When the question mark managed to make it out of their mouths, the three girls already started their rapid descent.

Part 2

---[Underwood] Ingredient Placement Area, Table Thirteen.

“Nn, There shouldn’t be a problem after stuffing this much into it.”

Izayoi had stuffed them so full with meat that it was almost equivalent to two human sized gunny sacks----No, it should be better described as meat sacks.

Not knowing whether a gryphon preferred raw meat or cooked ones, Izayoi decided to go by the rule “I will take all that I can” as he started filling the sacks. Hence resulting in the situation of having two huge bulging sacks of meat.

Just as he was about to carry the two meat sacks, Lily’s energetic steps and voice stopped him.

“Izayoi-san~!”

“Eh? What’s up, Lily? Done with the dishes?”

“Yes! And I got some pocket money!”

“Oh. And have you reached your target?”

“Yes! There shouldn’t be a problem with this much!”

Swish! With the soft sound of Lily’s ears perking up, she handed a plate of food over to Izayoi while her sparkling eyes looked towards the plaza where the opening ceremony was in full swing.

“I heard that Shiroyasha-sama will also be present for this Harvest Festival.”

“Yep, I remember hearing someone say that too.”

“Nn! It is also said that to congratulate the successful re-hosting of the Harvest Festival, she will be giving a very strong Gift…..”

The bonfire in the plaza went off before Lily could finish her words.

This was an elaborate act to make the focus be centered upon the stage which remain lit. Realizing that the Harvest Festival was finally starting, the voices of the participants gradually died away.

Following the lighting of the bonfires at the two ends of the stage, Kuro Usagi made her entrance onto the stage while triumphantly waving her right hand, initiating the start of the Harvest Festival.

“Sorry for the wait, everyone! But without further ado, [Underwood] Harvest Festival is officially on! The emcee for today is the appointed judge by [Thousand Eyes], the warm and friendly Kuro Usagi♪”

The Underwood City erupted in an earth-shaking cheer.

As though that was the signal for them, four faeries squirmed their way out from the meat sack.

“Ah.” “Oh?”

“Ya--?”Lily almost fell as she quickly backed away from the sack that burst open.

The surrounding people also gave similar sounds of surprise as they vacated the area around the sack.

The little demons that wore their identical magenta one piece dress arranged themselves in a row and took turns to shout:

“Aho!”

“Baka!”

“Dummy!”

“Bastard!”

Having spit out their insults, they continued to chatter amongst themselves as they flew off towards the crown of the Great Tree. Leaving Izayoi and Lily staring after them after creating such a commotion----

And just a short period of ten seconds later, they would soon see a more nonsensical scene.

Part 3

Kuro Usagi welcomed the Host as well as the Guest of Honor as they too took to the stage.

“And now I shall hand it over to the representative for the Hosts of [Underwood] Harvest Festival- Sala Doltrake-sama! And the Guest of Honor from [Thousand Eyes]---Shiroyasha-sama! Let’s welcome them on stage to give us the opening speech!”

As her words fell, the bonfires on the stage blazed higher.

Coming up from backstage, Sala wore cultural clothes that were marvelously dyed with the unique skills of South, doing away with her usual casual clothes. Her long hair was pleated into braid and many hair ornaments were used for decorum, possibly to hide the scar of the severed horn. Her copper brown skin that had the beauty of good health in addition to the resplendent formal attire, brought out a beauty that others wouldn’t get the chance to see on normal days.

Sala stood on stage with a gentle smile while using her serious gaze to sweep the sight of the city that lay below her

(… Eh? This is weird. Where’s Shiroyasha-sama?)

According to the original plan, Shiroyasha should have made her entrance onto the stage with Sala. Though Kuro Usagi felt a little flustered by the unexpected changes to the script, she decided to carry out her responsibility of running the show as though nothing was up.

As she spotted a glowing light near the crown of the Great Tree, Kuro Usagi realized that the order of entrance has indeed been changed.

(So that's how it is! I guess it wouldn't be a problem anymore if I ask everyone to focus on that…)

Skipping lightly back to the stage and twirling before she reached the corner, Kuro Usagi called for everyone's attention to be focused skywards.

"Everyone! Let's all look towards the crown of the Great Tree!"

The crowd began to quieten down as they looked up towards the skies.

So quiet was the plaza that one could hear the rustling of the Great Tree leaves being blown by the night breeze.

They were all waiting for the opening speech. Participants and hosts alike waited in silence.

Seconds after everyone's attention was focused on the glowing light, a flash of brilliant white light illuminated the whole crown of the Great Tree----

A very bad premonition started to nag at the corners of Kuro Usagi's mind.

"---Heaven is calling!

Earth is calling!

People are calling!

Why not give me some silence!"

(Yes, my thoughts exactly!)

Kuro Usagi's thoughts were totally ignored. The person who gave that yell leapt down from the top of the tree. That godly idiot was flying gracefully through the air

while glittery scales of light particles seemed to flake in her passing, creating a sparkling trail behind her.

Holding the position as the pure white sun that never sets, the one who breaks through the boundaries of the Celestial world and the Earth's surface.

The prided strongest problem kid of the East- [Demon Lord of the White Night], Shiroyasha has descended.

"Children of the Great Tree! Time waits for no man indeed. You have managed to revive within a short time of ten years. And that, is an amazing accomplishment!"

Elegantly moving her wafuku sleeves while touching down on the stage, Shiroyasha flipped open her folding fan that had the two goddesses outlined in white on the pitch black background of the fan paper.

Compared to her previous words, the current tone was much more solemn and it made it difficult to believe that she said some weird words for her entrance.

After which she took out two flags that she brandished proudly in the air.

"To all the [Draco Greif] Alliance comrades that united as one to defend [Underwood]! Let this be the night for me to give praise for your achievements! And now, I shall bestow to you the Gift that only belongs to the Southern Floor Master---- the [Horn of Dracogriff] that has two thousand years of Spirit power stored within it!"

"OOOooooooooh!" The resounding cheers shook the city of Underwood.

[Horn of Dracogriff] was the condensation of the spirit power of Draco Greif into a Gift that can be handed over to the next generation. And that was definitely a treasure for the Alliance members.

The reverberation of the cheers was so strong that it shook the cliffs and even made the branches of the Great tree tremble.

“There’s more! The proper ceremony of the Gift presentation will be done on the last day of the Harvest Festival, so just enjoy yourselves to the fullest in this Matsuri--- And that’s all I have to say.”

Shiroyasha beckoned to Sala to step forward as she got off the stage.

Seeming to have come to terms with her inner self, Sala stepped up to the center of the stage where she gazed down upon the City with what seemed to be motherly affection.

“---I must first apologize to all for saying this during such a joyous occasion. Using such a chance as a leader to interrupt the Festivities, is quite ill-mannered of me…… However, it is only today and at this moment that I hope for everyone to give me some time to speak.”

As she spoke, the cheering lapsed into silence, seeming as though it were just an illusion.

Gazing up to the Great Tree emblem that was regally flying high on its post….it gave her the feeling of having reached the end of her journey as she continued:

“I bet everyone knows about what I did three years ago…. Having abandoned the post of being the successor, running alone from my homeland. Betraying the fate of

succeeding as the next leader of my family and its responsibilities. And the one that accepted me then was [Underwood] and the [Draco Greif] Alliance."

"…"

"No matter which place I go to, the act of betraying one's family shouldn't be forgivable. However, there were those that continued to trust me and supported me, even to the extent of electing me as the leader of 'One Horn'. Besides thanking you guys, the previous leader of [One Horn] and my comrades, I really do not know how else to thank you guys. And to meet their expectations of me, I've worked hard till where I'm today…To tell the truth, till this moment, I still doubt if I managed to live up to their expectations."

It was one of the rare moments that Sala had that troubled smile on her. Yet it wasn't able to shadow the sense of achievement that seem to radiate from her being that made her all the more radiant.

Watching Sala from the plaza, Izayoi realized how similar it was for Sala as it was for the three of them.

---"Abandon your family, friends, wealth and all that you have in your world and come forth to Little Garden".

Abandoning the life she had lived for two hundred years, and leaving her homeland…. She was very much in the same situation as them, or may even have had more determination than them to start a new life outside on her own.

Imprinting the regal sight of the flag flying high in the tree top, Sala calmly ended her speech:

"I hope for everyone to take away more than just the memory of [Draco Greif] Alliance's ascension to Floor Master during the Harvest Festival. But to remember the [Underwood] that managed to overcome its many trials and revive as you see it today…With that, I would like everyone to enjoy yourselves in the Harvest Festival."

Bowing to the audience, the entire Underwood city erupted into cheers.

Amidst the loud applause and praises---Kuro Usagi gazed upon the two flags with tears threatening to flow from the corner of her eyes.

Clenching her fist. (One day……we of [No Name] will be able to retrieve our flag!)

Swearing silently to herself, she joined the applause for Sala.

Even after Sala had left the stage, the praises and applause for her continued to be heard.

Part 4

"…So I see…What a formidable opponent indeed."

Izayoi had also joined in the crowd for the cheering and was quite generous in his volume as well. It was said that the reason behind [Underwood]'s rapid revival has largely been the contribution of the skills and knowledge that was brought over by Sala.

Then [No Name]'s first target would be to achieve a similar result.

"But first things first, I would need to bring the meat to Gry. Lily, how about you?"

"I will be meeting up with the senior group. I heard that [Six Scars]'s signature dish is almost grilled to perfection too."

"Oh, it's that [Chop! Grill! Bite!] Three step dish right?"

"Yes. According to Leticia-sama, it's a [Cuisine born for the sake of being devoured], so I'm really looking forward to it."

"Really? Then, Lily, Let's part…"

Dong! Though it was the sound of something colliding into the ground, that sound was quite a soft landing.

Following that, a familiar voice came from behind Izayoi. Ignoring Izayoi totally, Yō who just landed with her mini whirlwind rushed pass him to grab Lily's shoulders.

"I want to eat too. Where is it?"

"Eh….ah? Nn…. I think it should be in front of the cliff."

"Okay! Let's make use of this chance when those two are still unable to respond to leave this area! Let's go get the fast food!"

Lily shook her fox ears in bewilderment as there was something overbearing and ominous emerging in an aura around Yō.

Heaving a weakly protesting Lily into her arms, Yō left the ground with a smooth control of a whirlwind.

…This scene was definitely like the passing of a raging windstorm. Having witnessed the drama in a daze, he snapped himself out of it when he realized the abandoned Asuka and the female shop assistant and reached out his hand to them.

"…..What are you guys doing, Oujo-sama?"

"…This has nothing to do with Izayoi-kun"

Asuka said as she grabbed his outstretched hand while pouting.

The female shop assistant also stood up and dusted her clothes with her hands, acting as if nothing just happened as she asked: "Right. That person over there. There's some information that I would like to know---"

"Hey. Your wafuku is kneaded up and has exposed your underwear."

"if you have seen a fist-sized faerie--- EH!? NO WAY!"

"Just joking."

Swish! The female shop assistant swung a naginata down. However, this technique was stopped by Izayoi who clapped his bare hands on the blade.

Judging by its size, the naginata should be a weapon summoned from a Gift Card.

“Eh? You aren’t just a normal shop assistant?” Izayoi exclaimed as he was impressed by her fast reactions.

“Having some martial arts background is to be expected for a shop assistant. Since my job entails the extermination of vermin that do not know any shame like you!”

Both of them did not back down.

Giving a sigh, Asuka commented: “But…. It really is exposed fully.”

“No Way!”

“Yep, just joking.”

Swish! Freeing her naginata, the shop assistant swiped her weapon at Asuka.

“You…Your Community members are all idiots or what!?”

“ “We won’t deny that.” ”

“In this kind of situation, you should be denying that.” The female shop assistant’s face was red and flushed with anger.

Who would have expected that teasing this person could result in such an interesting outcome. The two of them have learnt something new about the female shop assistant.

Part 5

---Square where [Six Scars] hosted their buffet.

Nom Nom Nom

"How…How can it be?! With that small mouth of hers, how is it possible for her to eat at that speed……"

"Could it be that she has a 'Gift card that stores food' hidden within her mouth?"

"No! She isn't using that kind of cheap tricks! It is just purely---chewing and swallowing at a rapid pace!"

"What……" The chefs' surprise lapsed into silence.

The audience too, held their breaths at that.

During that time, Yō continued to dispatch the food into her mouth.

"A speed that a naked eye cannot catch…Speed Gourmet Eater….!"

"Hahaha! This seems really interesting!"

"Yep! This makes me remember the heroic warrior ten years ago….This girl is also a challenger! Oi! You guys! Bring all the food from the storage over! Since it has become like this, let's wage war!!!!"

"OOOH!" The chefs answered in the same enthusiasm as they brought more ingredients over and churned out more dishes, one after another.

Having heard something good even in her ravenous state, Yō decided----to stop using the slow speed that she had deliberately used for their sake.

Untightening her abs, she increased her speed.

Faster, faster and faster. To be faster than the lighting of the fire, faster than the time needed for heat to be conducted, faster than the speed of chopping the meat, Yō focused all her concentration to speed up----!

Part 6

"…….. Nn"

Lily was the only one who didn't join in the crowd that was heating up quickly. Just standing in a corner where Yō had left her and seemingly in a daze.

If Yō barfed now, the whole situation would definitely freeze over with Yō and the chefs becoming the targets of pity for having done such weird acts.

Hence, Lily decided to follow the trend of those around her.

"Yō, Yō-sama! Gambatte!"

"That's right! Keep it up little girl!"

"That's really disappointing! Chefs! It's down to two plates already!"

"WoaHHHHHHH!!!! We will not give up so EASILYYYY!"

The Buffet area's atmosphere was getting livelier.

Giving up on the specialty dish of [Six Scars], Lily decided to find the others of the Senior group as she turned away from the crowd.

However, amidst the heated crowd, a cold voice could be heard saying:

"….Hmph. What's these ruckus for? Isn't it just a [No Name] trash that is eating ravenously like a hungry soul?"

"---Eh?" Lily stopped in her tracks.

And another soon followed.

"Oh that person is one of those right? A monkey that is elevated to something resembling a human after defeating a dragon."

"Oh, so it's that small kiddy Community…. No wonder she's so ravenous. It must have been hard for them to have lived on scraps for meals."

"And since they are [No Name], the fame will be temporary. No one will remember them after the Harvest Festival is over."

"That's for sure. They will have to survive on scraps again when they have to return to their usual life."

"Yep. Trash is just trash. No matter how much accomplishment they may have, there is nothing for them to build a reputation on without a flag---"

"----That's not true!"

With that, all the focus of the crowd was turned upon Lily who had shouted very loudly.

The guy who smeared insults one after another on [No Name] was a type of winged human race. A human body with Eagle wings sprouting from his back, a body that was lean but well trained and muscled. A mane of hair that grew on his head and eyes like that of a cruel predatory bird that focused his poisonous stare towards Lily.

"….What's your problem, Little Kitsune…chan?"

"I'm also a member of [No Name]! I heard the insults that you have smeared on our Name very clearly! I demand that you take them back immediately and apologize!"

Lily's face was flushed with anger and her fox ears had perked up as well.

One of his followers seemed to have gotten an idea of the situation and laughed as he stepped forth.

“So that’s how it is… I now know who you are… but do you know who it is that you were talking to? He’s the leader of [Two Wings], the Great Hippogriff Eudemon Griffith-sama!”

Hearing the words of the follower, it caused Lily to feel a little shaken.

“Hi,Hippogriff? But Hippogriffs are supposed to be a cross between Gryphons and horses….”

“Are you actually stupid? There’s nothing special about therianthropy. Noting that many eudemons and kemonos are in their therianthropy state while in the plaza, we had just followed suit…. Oh well, let’s cut to the chase, how do you plan to pay for having used that kind of tone and unwise choice of words?”

“I…I’m will not even plan it! The ones who asked for the apology is us!”

“Hmph! Recognize your position! Griffith-sama is in line for the next leader of the [Draco Greif] Alliance, and that makes him [Floor Master] of the South Side. Why would he need to bow to a mere [No Name]!”

“Wait! What’s the problem?”

Everyone’s focus shifted again to the previous direction.

The person who had that strong reaction to the words wasn’t Lily. But it was Yō, who was at the center of the plaza, staring straight at Griffith in astonishment as she stopped her meal.

Griffith ran his hand through his mane of hair as he showed a feral grin.

“Why? Haven’t you heard from that woman? After breaking her Dragon horn, that woman’s Spirit level has diminished to the point where she cannot even utilize her

own power as smoothly as before. Her recommendation to be the representative was based on her strength and now that she has lost that, wouldn't resigning be the proper action to be taken?"

"… Is that…. True?"

"I'm not the kind that would sow this kind of lies for a sly motive. If you do not believe me, you are welcomed to go ask her yourself. Abandoning the pride of a dragon, and breaking off her bright future is just the thing that a foolish woman would do."

Griffith gave a dry laugh while his companions followed his lead and added their distasteful laughter with his. Hearing where the conversation was heading, the crowd had already began holding their own heated discussions amongst themselves.

Ignoring the others around her, Yō got up and strode over to him.

Closing the gap to just a small distance between their noses, Yō calmly said in a casual tone: "Rectify that."

"What?"

"Sala isn't a 'foolish woman'. She broke off her horn to protect [Underwood]……and my friends."

Yō demanded an apology with an indifferent attitude. However, the fact that her voice was in a monotone, made her words seem icier than normal.

The followers laughed at her actions while butting between Yō and Griffith.

"Oi. Little Brat, Get …"

The crowd never got the chance to hear the full words of 'Get Lost'.

Because that voice was----lost in a place two hundred meters above the city.

“Eh?.....*Cough**Puke*!”

A mouthful of blood spurted out, from the follower that let his mouth loose, as he started his descend to the ground. Not even understanding what happened in that moment, he had already been transformed into a free-falling object that was futilely waving its arms and legs until it dropped into a reservoir of water.

At the same time, Yō’s stunt left the whole crowd too stunned for words.

If it were to be converted into time, it would be even shorter than an interval.

Using the [Genome Tree] to transform-----Yō wore a copy of a Pegasus leg guards while surrounding herself in a glittery whirlwind as she kicked the opponent’s abdomen which sent him flying into the sky.

“Gli,Glittery whirlwind…. A mix of a Gryphon and Pegasus Gift?!.....”

Another follower having turned pale backed away quickly, with his pride deflated.

---Winged Eudemons often had different Gifts for flight. Some of them can summon whirlwinds like the Gryphons, while there are also other Eudemons that can manipulate their weight to fly.

Even so, the Gift of a Pegasus could be counted as one of the most unique of them all. They were able to create a glittery mass of energy that propels them forward and continuously fly for a long time. Hence it wasn’t like a whirlwind, but something closer to a force field region that allows them to hover in the air. The aura of the Pegasus is basically similar to psychokinesis.

“Yō. Yō-sama …is so strong…”

Seeing Yō's battle form for the first time, Lily couldn't help but hold her breath, impressed by that immense pressure and power radiating from Yō.

Yō on the other hand, continued to look at Griffith with indifferent eyes.

"I repeat---RECTIFY THAT."

Pooling and condensing the glittery whirlwinds within a palm, Yō made it clear that she had given her last warning.

Despite her monotonous voice, it was evident that she was furious.

In actuality, Yō wasn't an easy person to piss off. In fact, her temper was so mild that she wouldn't mind people talking behind her back about her and placed living a carefree life as her lifelong aim. To piss her off this bad, Griffith had evidently stepped on a land mine.

"……Hmph."

A swirling mass of Light and Whirlwinds compressed together.

Even in the face of such a sight, Griffith's face still had a composed and confident smile.

"Oh right, come to think of it, there's still another idiot who did a stupid act and embarrassed himself."

"?"

"For Winged Eudemons, our Wings are a symbol of being in control of the skies. For an eagle that is Lord of the birds, it is needless to say---That guy. Is he still living well? To help another of you [No Name] monkeys, and losing his Eagle Wings….

That foolish younger brother of mine, really is an embarrassment. The peak of all fools!”

Yō was shocked. She definitely didn’t expect the civil and polite Gry to have such an elder brother. Griffith used this moment to back off a little and dispel his therianthropy status that caused his figure to shapeshift.

Reverting back to his original form- A Eudemon that looks like an eagle for the front half of the body and looking like a horse for the lower half, a Hippogriff. However his features---

“Widen your eyes and behold, you brat with that fake power of yours! The third generation of mystical beast- having a Gryphon and Longma’s strength! I, Griffith Greif am the strongest crossbred Eudemon!”

Lightning flashed while whirlwinds raged with his howl.

Yō readied her stance accordingly as well.

Seeing that these two would not be giving way to each other, the crowd decided to make themselves scarce as fast as they could, scrambling and jostling to get away.

Only Lily stood behind Yō, having been the instigator that led to this situation, she had watched the progression anxiously.

(Sorry Yō-sama…… It’s all my fault for saying those words without second thought……)

Having caused this ruckus, there would be a punishment for sure.

If she left this place, Yō would have to face the punishment alone and carry the burden of the blame. So Lily chose not to run and was determined to stay at her original spot.

Lightning flashed and thunder roared, while raging winds howled in agony. The repeated lightning strikes caused the cliff to form a crater.

(…It's starting…)

Both parties were measuring each other's distance and waiting for the best moment to use their best techniques on the other.

As they made their move to collide their attacks, and determined were they to have a showdown, at that very moment----

"Okay. It ends here."

---- A third party appeared and defeated them simultaneously.

Chapter 5

Part 1

----[Underwood] VIP room, Kasukabe Yō's bedroom.

Yō came to all of a sudden and her eyes snapped open.

The moisture saturated air that is unique to the water tree stimulated Yō's nasal airway. It would seem that this was a room in the Great Water Tree. Still in a daze, she turned her head to the side and saw Calico cat.

Calico cat alerted by her movement, ran over to her side immediately.

"Ou, Oujo! Are you okay?"

"….Calico Cat."

Having been hurt in the battle with the huge dragon, Calico cat had been undergoing treatment in [Underwood]. Though bandages were still wrapped around his belly, he still ran over to show his concern about Yō's body condition.

"Oujo, you really scared me there! Seeing them carry you back here and out of it too, my old legs almost gave way under me too! Word was that you were knocked out of it by a person who intervened in the fight…. Is it still painful?"

Knocked out of it by a person who intervened--- Hearing that, Yō finally got a grasp of the current situation.

"…I lost?"

"The fight? The conflict was ended with a [K.O both sides]."

"…?"

Not understanding what Calico cat meant, Yō tilted her head in confusion. But soon propped her body up as she slid her legs over the bed's edge to get off. And that was when a sudden stab of pain coursed through her abdomen.

"Wu……!"

The throbbing dull pain caused her to feel faint and sit on the floor. However, Yō wasn't destabilized by her injury but it was more of surprise. The pain wasn't unbearable and hence she could conclude that it was a light one.

However, Yō could not remember the cause for this pain.

Giffith was in the battle stance that utilized lightning and whirlwinds that were generated from himself. Following that line of thought, a throbbing dull pain in the abdomen would be very strange. Not to forget the fact that she hadn't sustained any other injuries on the other parts of her body.

"Who….."

Who----was it that defeated me?

Part 2

---[Underwood] Harvest Festival Headquarters

After the commotion between Yō and Griffith, Izayoi, Asuka, Kuro Usagi and the leader of them all, Jin gathered in the Matsuri planning HQ.

The one that turned up to represent the [Two Wings] Community was the one in charge, their leader, Griffith. The guy who was beaten by Yō's stunt had been warded in the hospital to have his severe wounds treated.

The atmosphere of the place was very tense. Though it was just a stare off between the two parties, with a table in between, the emotions were so high strung that a touch would be enough to set it off. Though the only one that has kept his calm is Ren, he was already drenched in cold sweat at that point.

A long sigh came from Sala as she finished reading the report and look up at both parties in turn---

"……I've understood the sequence of events that has led up to now. I won't be pursuing the matter for both parties this time. However, if such offense is repeated, the ones involved will have to be sent out of the Harvest Festival grounds---That's all."

"What kind of joke are you trying to pull now?!"

Griffith howled loudly as he repeatedly slammed the table with his palm.

Successfully, he got all eyes in the room fixed onto him.

"Representative Sala! These guys have caused harm to my comrade! Yet, you choose to let them off this lightly?"

"Have you forgotten your share in this incident? The insults towards me…I can turn a blind eye…"

"What nonsense are you saying?! Isn't that the most important matter?!"

Sala's choice of words caused Asuka to erupt in anger and slammed the table with her palm.

"This is the first time that I've heard the news of your pending resignation. You're the one who contributed the most in the defending of [Underwood], so why do you need to give up your position as the representative?!"

"This is the confidential matters of the Alliance, I'm not obliged to discuss them with you."

"…what?!" Asuka's exclamation came out more like a mumble as she couldn't find anything else to retort to that.

Asuka didn't expect Sala to openly reject her and could only clench her teeth, letting her words simmer in her belly. If the reason for Sala's resignation was due to the act of breaking her horn, it wouldn't be a far cry to say that Asuka had some responsibility to bear as well.

Sala seemed to feel bad about it as she averted her gaze and continued the main topic.

"…Anyways, Griffith. It is only right to challenge you to a duel for your indiscriminate spreading of slanders isn't it?"

Sala's words were sharp and reprimanding. However, Griffith wasn't about to back off yet.

“Sure. If it were a duel and a casualty went down, I have no complains. But that little brat attacked and injured my comrade without a warning! This is just an act of violence!”

The veins on his face had become clearer and throbbed with Griffith’s anger. Even so, the reason for this anger wasn’t for his comrade, but just a pretext for his real reason, the embarrassment of his Community in front of the crowds. The root was still his selfish pride.

Though Sala had already seen through him, she avoided bringing that up and she stood to leave.

As Griffith was about to continue his badgering, someone else stopped him.

“---Just drop it. Can’t you see that Shasha-chan is feeling troubled?”

Having stood all these while watching the proceedings from a corner where he leaned against a wall, it was he who had broken off the conflict---One eyed Kouryuu. He smiled at Griffith with his lone eye squinting to form just a line.

Hearing her name being called as “Shasha-chan” in that seemingly yet seemingly not Kansai accent of his, Sala’s shoulders drooped lifelessly.

“Kouryuu-sama…. That…. I’m already two hundred years old, and you still call me “Shasha-chan”… Isn’t it a little…”

“Hahaha! You say the same words as my sister, Shasha-chan!”

Kouryuu said heartily in his fake Kansai accent while smiling in a way that didn’t seem to move the muscles that were supposed to be used for smiling. With that same

insincere smile that made people wary of him plastered across his face, he shifted his gaze to Griffith.

“Anyways, by your reasoning, it is quite true as well. From the reports, the lady from [No Name] was a little too defensive.”

“Wh…What did you say?!”

Asuka’s anger caused her pitch to be upped an octave as she protested. Yet, it was clear that compared to Griffith that stood up to start spewing protests, she was much calmer.

“Moreover, just who are you? This is a problem between us, [No Name] and [Two Wings]! Any judgement should be left to the [Draco Greif] Alliance Sala.”

Asuka said with open animosity towards him.

“Wait, Asuka…Wait a moment! This person is a friend of Draco Greif and also the advisor of the Alliance! He definitely isn’t any suspicious character!” Sala quickly intervened.

“…Advisor? I’ve not heard of a person with such a title in our Alliance.”

Griffith frowned in surprise. Being a leader of [Two Wings] and as part of the Alliance, he had not heard of such a position, and that showed how fishy it was.

His reaction only succeeded in making others deepen their suspicions.

Kouryuu smiled slightly while rubbing his hair with a hand looking troubled. Seemingly like a last resort, he took out a deep sea blue Gift card from his sleeve.

Seeing the Gift name that was recorded on the card, their faces turned pale.

The words written on the Sea-blue Gift Card was---[Great Sage who Devastate Seas].

“Great….[Great Sage Who Devastate Seas] Saurian Demon King?”

“Sau, Kouryuu-san is actually one of the Seven Great Demon Kings?!”

Kuro Usagi also exclaimed in surprise though slower than Griffith by half a beat.

Kouryuu sighed and rubbed his head with his hand awkwardly.

“Draco Greif and Garol had taken care of me in the past so I’ve decided to stay here for a while to return the favor.”

Kouryuu laughed heartily.

There was not a trace of malice in his smile.

But Kuro Usagi’s emotions were in a turmoil. She had seen his sworn sister a few days ago when Shiroyasha was dragging her around.

(Could it be that Shiroyasha-sama’s reason for coming to [Underwood]’s Harvest Festival…. Was for this?)

The one she had met before, [Great Sage Who Leaves Heaven in Disarray] Roc Demon King was ranked number four in the Seven Demon Kings.

In other words, his power would be equalling to that of Guaruda’s royal lineage or even higher.

(Unbelievable…. For such a big shot to be wandering in the lower levels…With that kind of strength, he would be at least a level five Demon Lord calibre.)

Although Kuro Usagi had known that Kouryuu was by no means an ordinary person right from the start, this was a level higher than what she had expected. Everyone acknowledges his power but he does not wish to improve by having a goal.

Seeming to notice Kuro Usagi's gaze, he smiled at her. But after knowing that he was a Demon Lord, that smile became more suspicious.

"Hmph… In the end, it's just a lazy bum that freeloads off us! You didn't even participate in the battle of the huge dragon and you still dare show your face here claiming to be an advisor. What rights do you have to intervene in our fight?"

"Yes you are right. Regarding the matter about the huge dragon, I will not defend myself on that… But this is a different matter. This time I had to intervene at all costs."

"What?" Griffith stared at him with eyes filled with animosity.

The closed eye opened slightly as Kouryuu said in a chilly tone: "Oh my, do you know who you were asking for the debt to be paid, furry haired young lad?"

"…Isn't that a rhetorical question at this point in time? Of course it's the [No Name]s."

"Aho. These kids aren't the main problem. Shasha-chan neither. The most scary problem is….. your insult on Shiroyasha's comrades."

Though words were about to come out from his mouth, Griffith gulped nervously as he turned pale and his red eyes widen in understanding. The scene was like that of a snake staring till the frog was stupefied. Continuing the attack, Kouryuu added:

“The gryphon mentioned is a member of [Thousand Eyes]. If word got out that you had slandered about her comrades and tarnished their reputation---- [Two Wings] might not hold out for two days and be obliterated, won’t it?”

“Hu….!”

“Shiroyasha who is known to be the strongest [Floor Master], is also a Celestial Being of the White Night. What’s scarier is that she has the authority over fourteen different Suns. To go straight to the point---- Were you trying to pick a fight with Fourteen Huge Dragons?”

When those words fell, the people who felt the chills wasn’t only limited to Griffith but everyone in the room.

---The previous huge dragon that attacked was one that was summoned using the ‘Ophiuchus’ authority. And that was the power of just one Sun authority.

Known as a holder of Sun authorities, Shiroyasha held 14 of them, more than half of all the Sun authorities.

“…And that is the reason why I had to intervene. To go up against a Celestial being or Buddha, isn’t a laughing matter. Because it will only land you in a state of devastation and needless to say, your flag will not be able to exist. Haiz…. That kind of thing is even worse than what you can imagine. To tell the truth… don’t try to see the sunset when you are still so young.” Kouryuu’s words contained much self-pity as he patted Griffith’s shoulder.

It was a tone that carried the understanding and regrets of having made many enemies out of the Shura Buddhas.

Though Griffith's dissatisfaction could be seen from his eyes, he kept silent. After all, Griffith knew that Kouryuu had spoken the truth and did not have any more grounds to protest.

Clicking his tongue once, Griffith strode to the doors and reached for the handle, planning to leave.

However, behind him a person shouted to stop him, being unable to agree with this ending.

"….Hey **Horse Meat** wait up! Who said that you can leave just like that?"

"What?" Griffith turned back in bewilderment.

This reaction was perfectly normal. It would seem that never in his life did anyone dare call him, leader of [Two Wings], a horse meat. However, Izayoi couldn't care less as he slowly rose to his feet before shooting an angry and arrogant glare at Griffith's direction.

"Don't try to escape. Shiroyasha's business with you wouldn't be our problem. Why would we need to give in for that?"

"Iz,…. Izayoi-san…"

Kuro Usagi couldn't help but feel anxious.

Even though she was also furious about the matter, she didn't want it to be a needless bloodshed. Destruction of the community might be a bit too far-fetched but Shiroyasha would definitely be planning some revenge. Though Shiroyasha may clown around on normal days, she would be sure to act when such things arise and let it off. If she knew that someone had dared to insult her comrade, she would

definitely transform into a Shura Buddha that can defeat thousands and make a ruckus.

Kouryuu was also surprised by Izayoi's outburst as he pressed on his shoulder. "I say let's cool it for a while young one. I understand your feelings but the person who waved the fist first was from your side. In normal circumstances, it wouldn't be too surprising for you guys to be punished as well."

"Ha! What joke are you trying to crack?! Are you trying to tell me that using verbal abuse to hurt others is a forgivable act? Though verbal abuse isn't with the use of a physical blade and will not leave any visible wounds that bleed, it has the power to hurt the soul of the victim, causing the other party to tear without other's being able to see it on the outside…. In my opinion, this kind of underhand method can only be done by someone despicable and rotten, a scum that is worse than trash itself! Do I need to say how much hurt it would have been on a ten year old girl?!"

He turned his angry glare towards Kouryuu.

Seeing how worked up Izayoi was at this point, it gave the other [No Name] members a shock. They never expected to see Izayoi who always seemed to have a smile hanging at his lips to be ticked off to this extent for the sake of his comrades.

"If Shiroyasha decides to rampage, the reason would stem from the same idea…Am I right?"

Under Izayoi's glare, Kouryuu gave it some thought.

"……When you say it like this, it does actually make sense."

"Oi! What?!"

"Even though I did say so, seeing how the Harvest Festival is still ongoing and that other participants are still enjoying themselves,….. let's just settle it in the usual way of Little Garden. Use the Gift game to fight it out. What do you think?"

Kouryuu smiled as he gave the suggestion.

This compromise suggestion was quite good as well. Izayoi immediately nodded in assent and turned his stare back to Griffith.

"In the Harvest Festival's biggest Gift game event, the 'Riders of Hippocamp' two days from now. We will use that to trash it out. The losers will have to kneel and apologize to the winners—Any problem with that?"

"……Hmph. Then start your preparations to be thoroughly humiliated."

"Those are the exact same words I have for you. Remember it **Horse Meat**. The sword that you just unsheathed is a double edged sword. You may ridicule Gry's wounds but that was the cost for my hands and legs which I will use to clear the debt on you."

Though Izayoi was giving out a frightening pressure due to his anger, Griffith clicked his tongue again as he left the Headquarters.

Sending off the back with his eyes, Kouryuu let out a long sigh.

"Sorry young lad. Your decision is very reasonable indeed. Thank you for being able to control yourself to that extent."

"It's nothing. It wasn't done for you anyways."

Izayoi re-seated himself on his seat with a harumph.

However, his temper didn't last long as he suddenly smiled, seeming to have thought of something as he turned to Kouryuu.

"… Come to think of it, it's really quite shocking. Though I knew that you were strong, but never did I expect that you were the one recorded in <<Journey to the West>>, Saurian Demon King. There wasn't much recorded about you and so I have always hoped to have a good chat with you one day."

"Nn, me too! I would like to know the extent of truth recorded within the famous story <<Journey to the West>>"

"YES! ♪Kuro Usagi would also like to know about it too!"

The group of [No Name]s were looking at him with eyes full of excitement and wonder.

Kouryuu's smile faltered as he backed away.

"Ah, No. There's no need for it. What's there to know about an old man's…"

"We have prepared many delicious cuisines."

"There's also lots of tasty side dishes."

"And quality wine….. but we will be drinking juice instead. So let's go!"

Good. All prepared--- The two problem kids and their supposed caretaker made their point clear.

Realizing how futile it was to try to escape, Saurian Demon King could only smile wryly as he sank back onto a seat.

Part 3

---At the same moment, Shiroyasha had monopolized the Harvest Festival stage, holding her fan high in the air.

“---and because of the above reasons! Those who participate in the Harvest Festival main event ‘Riders of Hippocamp’! Whether you are the one who rent or use the Hippocamp~! All are to wear swimwear!”

“Wooooooooooooooah!”

“Long Live Shiroyasha-sama! Long Live Shiroyasha-sama! Long Live Shiroyasha-sama!”

“Long Live [Thousand Eyes]! Long Live [Thousand Eyes]! Long Live [Thousand Eyes]!”

The audience… No, it was the drunkards that gave out much cheers and clapping.

Shiroyasha spread her arms in a serious and divine manner. “In addition, regarding the specially chosen judge, Kuro Usagi! During the period of judging! She must wear a bikini~~~~!!!”

“Hurrrraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!!!!!!!!!”

“ Long Live Hero of Justice Shiroyasha! Long Live Hero of Justice Shiroyasha! Long Live Hero of Justice Shiroyasha!”

“Long Live Kuro Usagi mizugi! Long Live Kuro Usagi mizugi!”

“Wahahahaha! All of you, give praise to me! Gods and Buddhas, fear me! I’m the symbol of the Sun that never sets! Dominator of the Horizon! [Demon Lord of the White Night] King of the White Night I am!”

--- The situation was out of control. And this was in its literal meaning.

Kuro Usagi who's usually responsible for the role of disagreeing with everything that Shiroyasha says isn't around.

The host of the event, Sala isn't around.

The female shop assistant that usually restricted her freedom had already been out of it due to drinks.

Without anyone to restrict the once chained Shiroyasha who had escaped, all the participants happily supported her proclamations.

The first night of the Harvest Festival---No one was around to stop Shiroyasha's new found freedom.

Only a crescent of a new moon shone its light softly as it declined to comment on its observation of the crowd.

Interlude

---The curtains had been drawn for the first day of the Harvest Festival, which left everyone in high spirits.

By late night, peace had returned to the underground City and the silence pervaded into the surroundings.

The rustling of tree leaves could be heard near the river as a cool night breeze brushed past the branches. Since all the bonfires had burnt out, the only light was from the stars and moon that were reflected on the rippling water surface.

A figure could be seen sitting at the top of the tree, toasting to the moon and stars that were his only companions.

That was a man with an eye patch across his left eye---Saurian Demon King. Kouryuu looked over the quiet water city as he mumbled softly:

“Ah… How many years has it been since I last recounted my past to others……..”

In the end, Kouryuu had been badgered by the [No Name]s to recount his past. He had only managed to escape when they have all fallen asleep, too tired to hold him back anymore.

The incident where all seven of them, brothers and sisters had gone to challenge King Enma.

The incident where the Golden Rod was forcefully taken away from the palace of Dragon King of the Eastern Seas.

Then came the defeating of Prince Nezha and the declaration of war on the Jade Emperor.

And the various stories revolving around the core character of all the seven siblings---Handsome Monkey King [Great Sage Equalling Heaven].

“--------.”

Lifting his head skywards, he looked towards the new moon longingly.

No matter how many thousand times he had looked up at the moon, it would still make him recall that person’s back. Without fail.

Gold wheat colored hair that flowed beautifully like a wheat field waving in the wind.

A laugh so strong and vibrant that it felt like the life force that flowed within Earth during springtime.

Even though that person had been branded a Demon Lord by Heaven---- That person continued on with the self-proclamation of being a saint and was an idiot that kept aiming for justice.

(The Demi-Celestial Being of Earth……Sun Wu Kong Onee-san)

Kouryuu cast his gaze downwards towards his cup, swirling his memories around in the hazy reflection of moonlight, he downed it in a go.

---What the term Demi Celestial Being meant was to refer to someone who was born with a calling in life that was different in nature of what Celestial Beings would have. It was also the term for the highest level of Spirits.

Born with the Favor of Earth and from Earth, they were to be tasked with the mission as the protectors of Earth, which would be in the form of Mountain gods, Sea gods, Gaia the Earth goddess and Ape God Hanuman. After many light years, one of them would then awaken as a Celestial being. To put it simply, they were all candidates for the position as a Celestial Being.

Even so, Sun Wu Kong was different. No, it was more accurate to say that she would attain the position of being a Celestial Being that was hers from the very beginning.

As the legend goes, Sun Wu Kong was born from a magic infused boulder that stood on Mount Huaguo's apex. However, this was just an exaggerated mistake.

Basically, the magic infused boulder that Sun Wu Kong had popped out from, had been formed at the same time as Mount Huaguo---in other words, it had been around since the formation of land itself. She had been transported along a conduit in a volcano and shot out together with lava to the surface. Hence without the knowledge and mission that would have been nurtured in her if she were to be born within Earth, she appeared on the Earth's surface.

Neither a god, nor a deity, much less a demon.

Stepping up onto the journey of self-discovery, she finally found an answer---To use the huge amount of power that flows within her body to calm the chaos in the world and bring peace to the Human World.

Hence, she gave herself the name that would best express the task she burdened herself with.

Declaring that she was equalling to the sages in the plane of Heaven--- [Great Sage Equalling Heaven], she accepted the brand of a Demon Lord.

"……Sadly, in the end it was all just a dream…. A dream that couldn't even last for a hundred years."

Kouryuu laughed at himself as he swirled the wine in his cup.

Even so, it sure was quite enjoyable to pass time with those people who looked at him with wide eyes that shone with wonder while listening to his old valorous accomplishments during his youth. Despite it being just a short while.

"Floating wherever the waves brought me until now…Ke. How long has it been since I felt this happy?"

Two intertwining serpents were painted upon the red cup that he held in his hand.

That emblem looking design could very well be the emblem of [Great Sage Who Devastates Seas].

Lightly swirling the wine in his red cup, the reflection of the moon was distorted by the ripples……At this moment, he felt a presence approaching from his back.

Ding Ling---Hearing the clear tinkle of the bells, Kouryuu turned to welcome the person with a surprised look still on his face.

"……Oh, it looks like a person whom I've not seen for a long time."

"Nn. It's been a long time since we last met, Kouryuu. It's been a few centuries since, right?"

"Let me think…… It should be around the time when Wu Kong Onee-san decided to convert to Buddhism until now?"

Kouryuu gave his usual smile.

Shiroyasha gave a wry smile as she used her hand to press on her silver hair that kept dancing in the strong winds.

"…Yea. After that, you disappeared without a trace unlike your other siblings."

"Eh? Were you looking for me? I totally didn't know!"

"Cut the pretense. Didn't you get past all the people I've sent to look for you with that glib tricky tongue of yours?"

Shiroyasha sighed in slight frustration.

Apparently it was the right thing to bring them to find a person. 'Laplace Little Demons'. If it were left to other less experienced familiars, there would be no way to find the precise location.

Striding over to Kouryuu, Shiroyasha sat cross-legged beside him.

Flourishing a wine bottle out of thin air, she solemnly poured herself a drink before continuing:

"Jade Emperor, Taoists, Deities, Buddhists……Never was there a Demon Lord that could make an enemy out of so many gods and Buddhas at the same time. In the end, you guys forced out 3 of the 12 Devas and that young one, Shakya Muni was also forced to appear. Clearly having wreaked havoc to that extent and yet managing to survive intact for many more centuries to come, it really is an amazing feat."

"You said it. The strongest warrior gods were not a laughing matter. If it wasn't for Onee-san who singlehandedly held back the Taoist Faction… keke, I guess we would all be wiped out then." With grief reflected within his exposed eye and a mirthless smile lingering at his lips, he downed the rest of his wine from his red cup.

Even if one were a Demon Lord---a tragedy would still leave a huge scar in their hearts.

Bull Demon King and Roc Demon King's hatred towards the Buddhist World should also be the result of this scar.

Watching him act this way, Shiroyasha realized: Though it may seem that this guy always wear that smile on his face, he's actually a person riddled with wounds that are still aching after such a long time. A patient deserving of sympathy. For his wounds run too deep to be healed easily.

"Oh well, the polite greetings will have to end here. After all, I've been tasked to deliver a message to you by my Onii-san."

"Bull Demon King? He asked you to look for me?"

"Yep. He asked me to pass a message to you regarding the previous attack on the Floor Masters."

Shiroyasha was apprehensive as she leaned her body forward.

"…What kind of information?"

"The Demon Lord masterminds and the Demon Lords that invaded the South. The details have all been written in this letter."

Saying that, he took out an envelope from his robes.

Passing the envelope with the wax seal of [Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven] to her, he gave a stretch before slowly getting up on his feet.

Hu~ “With that, my task from my elder brother is accomplished. Come to think about it, to think that he would call on me after several hundred years just to make me a runner for this letter. My Onii-san just likes to assign tasks at random.”

“That’s nonsense. He must have valued your capability to have handed you this task. And if the things said in this letter is true, then the message carrier would most probably be waylaid by a Demon Lord.”

After all, the masterminds of the previous attack hasn’t been identified yet and if this letter was one that recorded such information, he would have to consider the possibility of it being snatched away while the letter was on its way.

So he decided to entrust his sworn younger brother to accomplish the task for him…

(…However, the reason should not only be that.)

Bull Demon King had left a letter for Shiroyasha to find for her successor at [Underwood].

And coincidentally, she found Kouryuu---Saurian Demon King in this place. This was a clear sign that it was no coincidence and Shiroyasha decided that this was a chance to pull him over to her faction no matter what.

“I still think that it’s quite a surprise to find you living in [Underwood]. Could it be that you had a hand in helping them recover so quickly?”

“Nope. I was just wandering around before deciding to stay here for a while just on a spur of the moment. I totally didn’t help out….oh, wait. The most I did might be to take a disciple.”

Maybe because of guilt, the smile on his face wavered before resuming its usual place.

Pretending not to notice the subtle change, Shiroyasha placed her cup down as she looked up towards the new moon.

"…… Are you the leader of some Community currently?"

"Nah, not possible. I guess you would also know that I'm just not cut out for that job."

"Your words are too humble. Having meditated for thousands of years at the submarine volcano of the Star Abyss to obtain the spirit level of a Dragon, there should be no shortage of people looking for you to fill that role with that level of spirit power."

"And that is too troublesome. Anyways, this flag [Great Sage Who Devastates Seas] is too small and can only hold one member, me." Though keeping his usual smile, he effectively distanced himself from the topic.

Mirth couldn't be found in that eye of his. Only a clear rejection.

"--- Shiroyasha, though I may not know what you are trying to hint at, I would like to advise you from holding too much expectations. As you can see, I'm one who has abandoned his worldly desires and will not give my utmost in anything. I would like to continue my aimless wandering life. This once is all because of my Onii-san having tasked me this job. I decline participating in anything troublesome."

"….Really? Then it's my bad."

Shiroyasha quietly closed her eyes for a while before getting up on her feet. Since the other party was this determined, talking further would be for naught. Since coaxing wasn't useful, she would just need to think up another plan. Having this in mind, Shiroyasha turned to leave.

However, at that moment, her eyes were drawn to a curious bruise that could be seen at Kouryuu's back, just a little away from his lumbar spine section.

"……Kouryuu, what happened to your back?"

"Oh, you mean this? When I tried to stop a fight, a girl managed to land a hit on me."

He lifted his left arm to show the bruise on his side.

The bruise on his back looked painful and looked blue-black in color. Judging from the severity of the bruise, it was even possible to have one or two fractured ribs.

"Ah, that girl really was quite something. Though she had already fallen unconscious, she was still able to see an opening in my defenses to land a punch way below my armpit. That kind of person can only be called a genius."

Kouryuu's voice carried a slight tone of amusement that wasn't detected in his words before.

And there was only one girl whom the Saurian Demon King had to knock unconscious in the Harvest Festival---

"---Hey, could it be that you laid a hand on Kuro Usagi?"

"Wha? Wait…No, it's not her! The one that I stopped the fight was between that little lad, Griffith and another short haired girl! Her name was….. Kasukabe I think."

"What?" It was now Shiroyasha's turn to be surprised.

From what Shiroyasha knew, just with Kasukabe's power, she shouldn't be able to land a hit on Saurian Demon King.

"Kasukabe actually injured you?"

"I won't use the excuse that it was my carelessness, after all the one who struck first was me. However in that state of losing her consciousness, she retaliated with a punch. And this kind of talent that only appears once in a while makes the lower levels such an interesting place."

Though he was giving off a dry laugh, the tone was completely different from his forced laugh earlier.

A fierce pride hung on the edge of his mouth--- A smile that was comparable to an earlier time when he was a Demon King seemed to appear on his face.

Seeing that smile, Shiroyasha's mind was struck by an idea.

(This is it……Even though he has become a 'floating withered log' now, it would seem that he still retains the spark that thirsts to battle with the strong.)

Then, there would still be some hope for this man.

As long as she can revive the fire in his heart through battle to feel alive again----- Then, she would just have to send a strong opponent to him.

Facing her back to the moon, Shiroyasha smiled as she walked over to Kouryuu.

"…Oh…Saurian Demon King. I still have another thing that I would like to discuss with you."

Chapter 6

Part 1

---[Underwood] Pastures by the river.

The next morning, Asuka, Yō and Kuro Usagi had gone together to choose the saddle and swimwear for the Hippocamp event.

The placement of the swimsuit displays were strategically placed next to the pastures for the convenience of the contestants.

Under the azure blue skies that had nary a cloud in sight for miles, Asuka and Kuro Usagi sighed together.

" ……so depressing…"

" ……Kuro Usagi also feels the same…"

"Haiz……" Both of them sighed as they chose their swimsuits. Though Asuka had been quite enthusiastic at the start before they left together, the sight of the amount of cloth used to make the South's swimsuits quickly painted the enthusiasm out of her face with a bright red blush that left her speechless.

Kudou Asuka who came from the Showa period is a lady through and through.

For Asuka who had grown in the period where it was the "preposterous are those who wear dresses that do not cover the knees" social expectation for girls, these swimsuits that only covered the chest and the important nether region was totally unacceptable.

"Just how are these any different from undergarments!!"

"But, these aren't anything special in the South…"

"I'm okay with seeing others wear such things! But when it's to be worn on me, of course it would be a problem!" Asuka flipped through the displays as reluctantly relented while still fuming.

On a side note, Kuro Usagi's swimsuit had already been chosen by Shiroyasha.

(A swimsuit prepared by Shiroyasha-sama……How minuscule would it be?)

Her bunny ears could not stop quivering.

Even so, it was too late for regrets. Her only frustration was directed at herself for having lost the opportunity to decide on it first.

"Might as well give up on it…No, No way! I must get back the part that we lost during the Hunting Event!" Asuka gave herself some self-encouragement.

Kuro Usagi also straightened up at that as she replied in a lively manner:

"YES! ♪ Asuka-san needs to save up for Gifts! While Yō-san needs to find a replacement for the headphones! Both of you will have to give your best!"

Swish Kuro Usagi's ears stood up straight.

However, Asuka merely smiled as she shook her head.

" …But, I'm not only striving for that reason alone."

"Eh?"

"Hehe, it's currently a secret. Right! We need to go choose the swimsuits for Lily and Percher too."

Asuka grinned as she said those words that had a much deeper meaning as she walked towards the children's swimsuit section.

Kuro Usagi hurriedly tried to catch up.

"Wait, Wait a moment! Setting aside Percher for now, why does Lily also need a swimsuit?"

"Oh? You haven't heard of it? It's said that those that were requested to help out in the event will also have to wear swimsuits……"

"Who…Who's the felon that came up with the request? As their caretaker, I object to that kind of request!"

"Don't be like that…. The kids also want to have a part to play in the event."

Asuka had her usual teasing smile on her face as she told off Kuro Usagi. Kuro Usagi only tilted her head, still unable to fully accept it but to continue her task as the caretaker, she decided to follow Asuka to the children's swimsuit section.

Having easily chosen a swimsuit without much stress, Yō gave a sidelong glance at the other two before racing happily to ride on a Hippocamp.

"Giddyap!"

Yō straddled the saddle with her legs and lightly waved her whip.

---There were webbed fin like feet instead of hooves while it was a dorsal fin for the mane of the Hippocamp.

Born with the Gift to run on water and in water, sprays erupted around them as they propelled themselves forward with their feet. And that may be just a side effect of their Gift.

Yō patted the neck of the Hippocamp as she commented:

"Quite an unusual feeling……The ride is much bumpier than on a horse."

"My lady, you must be joking! The water surface isn't that calm as stable ground. After all, it's by the control of all of our four limbs balance of the water surface tension as well as the water pressure that causes the moment of our propulsion to be very sudden and jerky."

"Oh… so that's the reason …. Okay."

Releasing her hold on the reins, Yō stood up on the saddle.

Though Yō's leather boots were soaking wet when she leapt off into the river, she only sank into the water just enough for it to wet her knees. Instead of sinking further down into the water, Yō had begun to float up to the water surface.

Watching this, the Hippocamp couldn't help but give a little gasp of surprise.

"Wow, that's really impressive! It has never crossed my mind that humans could wield a similar Gift as my kind!"

"Nn….. But this seems to be much more difficult than what I expected."

Yō took her first step with her right foot to step upon the water surface.

Only to obtain the same result as before…. Her foot sank into the water surface till it reached her knee.

(The surface tension, buoyancy and the control of water pressure…. *Waa* This is really difficult to control.)

The complexity of the stunt caused Yō to knit her brows together.

Though the ability to run on water was based on the theory of Fluid Mechanics, a Hippocampus wouldn't have to rely on the theory, but their bloodlines and personal experience. And that could be seen as a work of Nature's wonders.

Actually, the Gift of the Gryphons also had its mechanics and theories behind it. However, the difference was that the varying input of energy only affected the speed of flight and was much simpler to control.

"Nn. Though I intended to travel on the river with you for sightseeing, it would seem that I won't be able to accomplish that today."

"No worries, you are already quite impressive already. Even for my kind, it would take at least half a year before a young one learns to run on the water surface. Just being able to stand on the water surface is quite a remarkable feat."

"Really?" Yō rubbed the back of her head as she smiled after her reply.

"Well then, let's head back. My friend is also here to choose her ride for the competition."

"Nn, Let's do our best for tomorrow then."

Holding the reins while the Hippocamp turned back, Yō and the Hippocamp headed back to the location where they had first met, in a flurry of water spray that marked their passing.

Arriving at the pastures for the Hippocamp, Yō noticed Asuka who have chosen a swimsuit standing beside the river waiting for her.

"Asuka! Have you found a swimsuit that you like?"

"……Kasukabe-san." Asuka, who came to welcome Yō back on the river bank wore a woven straw hat.

She wore a red bikini with a pareo of the same shade of red.

Though it was quite revealing, but it exuded a sense of elegance as a whole. And that could only be attributed to the good upbringing instilled in her life.

Kuro Usagi who stood nearby, grabbed Asuka's shoulders from behind.

"Hehe, how is it? The theme is [The 'girl from Purdah"s first experience at water games] ♪!"

"Nn, sounds befitting. GOOD JOB, Kuro Usagi!"Both of them looked at each other while giving a thumbs up.

Whereas Asuka turned her blushing face aside. "Com,Compared to that! Have you decided on your partner?"

"Nn. That would be him over here, Zipopo Tamama-san."

"Sipu……?"

Si~ Zipopo Tamama snorted in greeting. Asuka and Kuro Usagi had to do their best to stifle the urge to laugh as they bowed politely.

"Plea, Pleased to meet you. Zipopo……Zipopo Tamama-san."

"Nn, he says pleased to meet you too. Have you chosen your partner yet, Asuka?"

"No. Kasukabe-san, could it be that you haven't heard of the change in rules yesterday?" Asuka asked in surprise.

But Yō only responded by tilting her head to one side.

Seeing that, Asuka decided that passing Yō the [Geass roll] goatskin parchment would be the swiftest solution.

<<GIFT GAME NAME: "Rider of Hippocamp">>

Rights of Participation:

***Eudemons that can travel on water and their rider. (flight is not allowed)**

***Up to three other participants can be chosen to act as support, for the Rider and the Race horse, from the banks of the river.**

***For those that rented a Hippocamp from the Headquarters, the female participants will be required to wear swimsuits.**

Things that are prohibited:

***Any attacks aimed towards the Race horse are prohibited.**

***Any contestant that falls into the water will be seen as falling from their steed and will be disqualified.**

Winning Condition(s):

***Travel upstream from [Underwood] and collect a fruit from the Sea Tree;**

***And pass all the others by to come in first at the end-point to win.**

Oath: ***Participating Community, swear upon your glory and flag to respect the above stated content.***

"[Draco Greif] Alliance" Seal

"Eh? From an individual match to a group match?"

"YES! Details of their reason for the changes will be told to us later."

"Oh. Okay." Yō replied offhandedly though she was already lost in deep thought.

Watching how Asuka was amusing herself by kicking at the water at the river bank, Yō suddenly spoke up: "…I think Asuka should participate as the rider."

"Eh? Kasukabe-san isn't going to ride?"

"According to the rules, there can only be one rider while the helpers are to stay on the banks of the river. If the Hippocamp travels at 70km/hr, would Asuka, you, be able to catch up?"

Pak! Asuka realized the truth in Yō's words as she clapped her hand once in understanding.

As Deen was still in the midst of repairs, Asuka did not have any means to move herself at that kind of speed. Even with her as a support, her influence would be very limited as well.

"Moreover, Asuka's Gift is better suited as a rider than as a support."

"Rea….Really? Since you put it that way, I will just give it a try."

Asuka handed over her straw hat to Kuro Usagi before hopping onto the saddle.

When she made sure that she had firmly grasped the reins in her hands, Asuka urged the Hippocamp to move without putting much thought to it.

"Then ---Let's go towards the plateaus at FULL SPEED!"

As her words fell, the Hippocamp gave off a fierce neighing roar as it charged forth out of the pastures. The water sprays caused by the movement were much fiercer than before, churning out a line of froth that marked their passing. Asuka who held the reins for dear life had already turned pale from the violent jostling of the Hippocamp's gallop.

"Eh? Wai…Wait a moment! Ahh!"

Those were the words that Asuka thought of saying but they never did make their way out since the jostling was so violent that they were caught in her throat. And since no command was given for it to slow, the Hippocamp continued to gallop and give its fierce neighing roar as it headed towards the distance. Yō and Kuro Usagi who were looking at them in admiration, waved goodbye to the fast fading dot that was Asuka.

"Impressive! At that speed, victory should be assured!" Kuro Usagi who watched the receding speck called Asuka, gave a little cheer.

However, Yō's face said otherwise.

"Unfortunately, speed alone isn't enough to assure our victory."

"Eh?"

"Because it seems that a certain someone over there will also be participating."

Following the direction Yō's finger was pointing towards, Kuro Usagi looked towards the opposite bank of the river. And appearing before her very eyes was a healthy looking, strong and sturdy Hippocamp and its rider, Faceless.

Noticing their gaze on her, Faceless used her reins to steer her Hippocamp towards them.

Seeming to hesitate for a moment after getting off her steed, she initiated the greetings.

"……It's been a while, [Highborn of Little Garden]. And the lady beside, I apologize for my rudeness the other time."

"Ah…No, I never took it to heart. But compared to that, your steed……looks really beautiful-----!"

Yō couldn't help but gaze upon Faceless's steed with eyes that shone with her admiration.

The steed had a sturdy looking blue body and the dorsal fin that acted like a mane, unique to its kind, was of a translucent green. Wet from the river's water and allowing sunlight to filter through its dorsal fin, the brilliant light that was refracted from it seemed to fill one's vision with its grandeur. The balanced proportions of its body parts was so perfect that it could almost be called an animated sculpture.

Placing aside the difference in species, it was the first time that Yō's eyes have set upon such a beautiful steed.

"Really Beautiful…… But this child isn't a rental Hippocamp right?"

"You're right. This is one of the steeds that's given to me by my Queen." Faceless had replied in a plain tone.

Though it might be a trick of the eye, it just seemed that the corners of her lips seemed to have raised slightly, seeming to be happy about her steed being praised by others.

Kuro Usagi also came over to the Hippocamp's side, pondering over it in fascination.

"As expected of the favored one of [Queen Halloween], to be able to receive such a good steed."

"My Queen's the most powerful summoner. Though I'm given many other Eudemon steeds, when it comes to 'steeds that can gallop on water', it's still this child that fits the job."

She stroked the back of her steed gently as she said that. And the steed seemed to enjoy it as it leaned towards its master. Just by that sight, one could already tell how deep their trust was in each other.

Feeling a little threatened, Yō took a step forward. "……But, we will not lose. Since we lost out on the Hunting Event, it's time for us to make a come-back this time."

This was an open challenge to Faceless and she seemed to be surprise at the sudden turn of events for just a moment. But it was just for a moment only as her expression seemed to resume its normal composure and she replied in a calming tone as usual:

"I understand. I will accept your challenge seriously……But is it the right thing to do? I heard that you have a match with [Two Wings] to settle right?"

"Who would lose to those kind of people?" Yō answered simply while pouting unhappily.

Mulling over something for a while, Faceless decided to speak her mind.

"……Have you guys heard of the bet between the [Draco Greif] Alliance?"

Looking at each other in confirmation, Yō and Kuro Usagi both tilted their heads in puzzlement. Apparently, this was the first time they heard of such a matter. Having walked to their side and seemingly conscious about the others around them, Faceless lowered her volume as she whispered to them.

"I've heard it from others…. And it seems that if the victory goes to [Two Wings] in the Game of [Rider of Hippocamp], Griffith would be elected as the next [Floor Master] of the South."

Part 2

---[Underwood] VIP room, Gry's bedroom.

Amongst the VIP rooms within the Great Tree, there are also those that are specially made for Eudemons. A spread of hay for the ground and a water point which is directly from the Great Tree itself.

Gry currently resided in such a room after being injured in the previous battle.

Izayoi had carried the consolation prize into the room. The gunny sacks full of food that were swiped from the Harvest Festival the night before.

Guessing that the raw meat might pose a bit of a problem if left overnight, Izayoi went to find people to get them grilled or cut into bacon pieces to be cooked.

Taking a huge bite into the chunk of meat that hung to a piece of bone, Izayoi nodded in satisfaction.

"I've always wanted to try taking such a huge bite to eat meat."

"Ho? And why is that? Don't humans usually use utensils to dine?"

"That's right. But there's also this difference in the feeling. Won't you agree that just biting into the meat and tearing it from the bone makes it feel much more enjoyable?"

Izayoi gave a hearty laugh before tearing off another chunk of meat with his teeth.

Giving a wry smile in response, Gry got back to pecking at the chunk of meat held within his front talons.

While they were busy with their meals, the door suddenly opened without as much as a knock. And a pair of nekomimi Father and daughter walked in.

"Wa, dad, it's regular customer-san here as well!"

"Oh, isn't it the [No Name]s boy? You came to visit too?"

"I guess so…..Nn? It seems like you've brought some good stuff as well?

Glancing behind the two of them, Izayoi could see that there was a cask of wine beside the gunny sack that they brought.

Seeing how they just barged in and start laying out all the stuff they brought, Gry's wry smile remained on his face.

"Garol, I think that the act of bringing wine to a patient leaves much room for comments."

"This? Oh, so you aren't going to drink?"

"No, that's not what I said. But the responsibility to insist on the drink will not lie with me, but best left to you, Garol."

"Well said. It's all the fault of this uncle who insists on drinking with you in the early morning."

Having pushed all the blame off themselves, Izayoi and Gry accepted the wine poured for them.

Without complains, Garol was the first to toast.

"Come, for the second day of the Harvest Festival…. A toast to our injured hero!---GanPai!"

Chink! Their glasses were brought together in a toast.

Hearing the choice of words for the toast, Izayoi guessed the reason for Garol's purpose for visiting Gry.

(….I see… It must be due to the matter regarding that **Horse Meat**.)

Though they were from different Communities, it was still a member of the Alliance that had publicly insulted Gry's valor and it required an apology. Their visit was partially out of that reason, and also the fact that they did see Gry as a real hero, one that deserved a gathering like this.

One needn't apologize or pity a hero----Since it's cheers and praises that he should receive.

"Oh right. Is it true that the **Horse Meat** is Gry's brother?"

"……Nn. Communities that revolve around Eudemons do not have concepts such as marriage. Hence they can have children without much care about race."

"Oh~Seems like a trouble when it comes to inheriting the family heirlooms."

"No, that's not true for us Eudemons. The choice for the heir isn't by bloodlines, but based on the strength of the candidates. Hence, it isn't a problem where Draco Greif decides to have his babies. But…."

Garol paused awkwardly as he shifted his gaze to Gry.

Gry sighed and seemed to laugh at himself.

"That's something that happened ten years ago. In the duel with Griffith, I had lost and had to leave [Underwood]."

"……what?"

"It was during the time when [Draco Greif] Alliance first expressed its willingness to help [Underwood]. Griffith only learned of my existence then and he had complete confidence in his bloodline---especially the blood from his father. Hence he saw a pure blood Gryphon like me to be a thorn in his side."

"……Hmm?" Izayoi tilted his head in puzzlement.

"Wait a moment. Isn't that **Horse Meat** a so called third generation of Eudemon? And that he has a Gryphon and Longma's bloodline to make him a strongest type?"

---'Longma' is a crossbreed between a horse and a dragon. A type of Lesser Dragon, a Longma has the appearance of a horse with dragonish scales covering its body. Its abilities include the control of water and lightning. And Griffith was the crossbreed between a Gryphon and a Longma to produce a Hippogriff.

Gry and Garol knew about that but they still gave a depressing sigh.

"That fellow has so much self-confidence in his bloodline that it has come to a stage of pure arrogance."

"Even then, for that young urn Griffith, the real pride isn't the fact that he's from a Gryphon and a Longma...it actually stems from the pride he holds for his father, Draco Greif."

Izayoi punched his fist into his other palm as he saw the linkages already in his mind.

"Oh, so it's that. In other words, he just couldn't stand the fact that he had a brother looking so similar to his father."

"Yes, that's the thing. At the very least, it shouldn't be his own younger brother."

Garol sighed due to the many confusing feelings he had which he drowned in a cup of wine. From Garol's standpoint, both of them were the sons of his best comrade who stood and bore arms with him in battles. Though he might want them to make peace and find a common ground to agree on, he was still an outsider, not of blood relation and did not have the right to butt into their matters. Hence, Garol could only look from a distance and hope that both of them can live and grow up well… well enough to put aside their misgivings for each other in the future.

"Come to think about it, this is the first time that I've talked to Uncle like this. Ojou-sama and Kasukabe have been under your care for so long and it would seem that I'm late to have only greeted you now."

"Nah, there's no need to stand on ceremony with me. We already have much history with you [No Names], so there's no need to take it to heart." Garol laughed heartily.

Izayoi couldn't help but feel warm inside due to Garol's words. Though [No Name] had been destroyed once, but the strings of relation with its old friends have not be totally severed yet.

"So how is it? From the perspective of a former strategist of the previous [Floor Master], do those girls stand a chance?" Izayoi asked nonchalantly.

Garol hesitated before placing his cup down.

"About that…Let's start with Yō-Oujo. I believe that she is almost near completion. If we take away the flaw of taking matters into her own hands by herself, she would not require any more special training. It's even possible to leave it to her to grow stronger by herself."

--- As expected of Koumei's daughter, Garol thought to himself while smiling.

"Oh? That sounds really good."

"Nn……All the more reason for me to be drenched in cold sweat when they had that commotion yesterday. If that child becomes serious, that lad Griffith might become mincemeat in just one hit." Garol gave a long sigh.

Though Izayoi felt that it would have been great news if the punch did reduce a certain someone to mincemeat, he did not allow that thought to be voiced out.

"Looks like there's no need to worry about Yō……and about Ojou-sama?"

Hearing Izayoi's question, Garol's face changed.

Pouring rum into his cup, he answered in a cautious manner: "……Asuka-oujo has a much bigger problem."

"How so?"

"Her Gift is very strong. I've not heard of evaporating a metal bar with just a Gift that's supposed to give a small spark for lighting kindling."

"That's quite something." Izayoi's words was not a sarcasm for he was truly in awe.

He had not seen Asuka's own Gift in action. This is because he had only seen Asuka using Deen in battles. And that made Garol's input as a piece of information that was good for reference.

"The current problem is….. There isn't a suitable Gift for that child. Do you know how many Gifts she has destroyed in the past two weeks? Twenty-four. Gifts aren't any simple consumable product that can be bought off the shelves. If only she can use them with care. Haiz~" Garol gave a sigh again.

The reason for the sigh was because of Asuka's great talent in her Gift. And it can only be called a problem due to the expenses.

"To limit the expenses, I've given her many lessons on the use of strategies in battle to come up with counter-tactics…but judging by her character, I've a feeling that it will not work. Hence, what we can do currently is to replace the Gift when she destroys one."

"Hey, that's too wasteful."

"Hahaha! But for us, it is quite a profit!" Carol laughed cheerfully.

However, the financial situation of [No Name] wasn't that all that bright. A strong Gift that can withstand Asuka's power must be found as soon as possible---Izayoi vowed silently.

"Though it might not seem right for me to say it, but Ojou-sama does have quite an interesting talent."

"Not as exaggerating as yours right? To be able to destroy the strongest species with just one punch. If you want to talk about strange, I would say that you are much more strange, Izayoi."

Gry managed to join in at last and Izayoi replied with a loud laugh.

Even so, Garol just rubbed his chin while saying in a serious tone:

"I'm not clear about your situation…but I can at least see a clue about the source of Asuka's Gift."

"Ooh? Really?"

"Nn. I fear that the child is a kind of -----Atavistic phenomenon."

Izayoi's hand that held the cup froze in mid-air, having made it halfway to his mouth.

"……You mean it is a kind of trait that skips a generation or two?"

"What I mean is much different, but yet similar. What you meant was Intergenerational trait that occurs between generations. But this child is much different. If my deduction is right, her spiritual power---Could be due to a Divine being possessing her when she was born."

" ……?"

" Nn… Let's take for example, a couple that's unable to conceive a child travels to pray for a child from a god that governs child-birth, the child's relations would consist of the father, mother and the God. At this point, do you follow me?"

"Oh, that is much simpler to understand. I got it already."

"Good. Then, in this kind of situation, the child will become a being of higher standing in the mortal world. And I fear that Asuka is the result of a repetition of this same process for more than ten generations."

Izayoi's eyes grew wide at those words.

"More than ten generations…of reproduction with the aid of God's gift?"

"The one who endows the gift of reproduction might not be a god. It can be a demon, a spirit…. But considering her abilities, it would seem that it is an 80-90% possibility that she has the protection of god---which can also be phrased as the human who is closest to being a God. Because the power of that child is undoubtedly at the end that [Gifts]."

" OOoh?" Izayoi let out a breath in admiration.

Though he had heard of Asuka's power, this was out of his expectations that she would have such a talent.

"……Even so, her Atavistic condition may have another reason."

"And what is it?"

"Unless one is born a god, just by bloodline alone isn't sufficient to become a deity. For humans to become a deity, the accomplishment is [Meeting the quota of Believers]. Though my previous theory brought up the eligibility, it lacked the accomplishment."

Just when Izayoi's a step away from being fully convinced, Garol began to drink his wine solemnly.

Izayoi also raised his cup to his lips while wordlessly urging Garol to continue.

"Lad, have you heard of the theory of intersecting World Planes---called more simply as [Paradigm shift]?"

"…Yes to the former, but it is the first time hearing the latter."

"Really? Then you have to listen up. This will be very important for Asuka-oujo."

Placing down his cup, Garol leaned forward with a serious expression on his face.

Izayoi and the others had also sat up straighter, showing their focused attention.

"---[Paradigm shift] is not limited to humans or about humans, but a milestone that helps to demarcate an observation regarding a type of life form. Take for example, a large scale war, or a huge change in the biological evolution due to a natural disaster. That time period will be called a [Paradigm shift]. These events will be big enough to change the later generations and bringing an end to the previous

generation. And to progress, bearers of various [Gifts] will appear. Hence when tracing the background of a Community, one can often find the corresponding legend or history of the actual person."

"…I get it now… But how does it relate to Ojou-sama?" Izayoi asked in puzzlement.

In reply, Garol's gaze was sharpened. "Lad, the time period of that lass should be not long after the defeat of Japan isn't it?"

" ….So it's that!"

Izayoi finally understood and nodded his head vigorously.

Garol seemed to feel comforted as he continued: "My fear is that she's a candidate for [Patriot who saves his war-torn lands] or a similar idol. Born to a rich organization with a bloodline that is close to a Divine being. Though she might not be well known as of yet, she already possess the qualities to be the vessel that rebuilds the country's soul."

Hence, [Patriot who saves his war-torn lands], that sort of generic faith chose Asuka to be its host and gave her an intangible Gift and spiritual power. Allowing her to be born with a spiritual power that's supposed to be obtained through a lifetime of accumulated accomplishments.

"Awakening as a God due to the troubled times……No, in this case it should be a demigod that is more suitable. Since the life of a higher life form is a different species and Asuka's power is that of an undeveloped god…Even so, this theory still has an unsolved mystery. To summon Asuka over to Little Garden, there must be a convergence of possibilities--- In other words, we should be able to observe the same

phenomenon from different timelines. If it were by other methods of summoning, it would be unusual as well as unique…Lad, have you got any clue on it?"

"……"

Izayoi propped his chin up with his hand, seemingly deep in thought. But in actual fact, he wasn't even considering the question.

Japan in Sakamaki Izayoi's knowledge of it, had never recorded "Kudou Asuka" in its history. Garol's hypothesis of [Convergence of possibilities] would hence exclude her.

(However, there was still a mystery. According to recorded history, in the period of Zaibatsu(financial conglomerate) dissolution, there were only four major zaibatsu of Imperial Japan. Whereas, Asuka seemed to have told him---'I'm from the fifth biggest financial conglomerate in Japan'.)

Of course, that could easily be a misunderstanding on his part and the conversation may not have occurred.

Though it might be just an exaggeration from Asuka, at the very least, Izayoi had not heard of the existence of [Kudou Zaibatsu].

Hence, this made it a very insignificant but extremely irritating discordant note in the piecing together of information.

If the discordant sensation was due to the mysterious [Kudou Zaibatsu]---then, there might be a forking in their world pathways even before Asuka and Izayoi's time and spreading them far apart.

"……I understand your words, Uncle. Thanks a lot, it really is quite a good reference material."

"Really?"

"Nn, to thank you, my elder, let's drink some more! Here!"

Izayoi laughed out loud as he carried up the wine barrel to pour into Garol's cup. He poured so much that rum started to overflow from the brim.

"Wa... Hey! This year's rum has been seasoned well. Don't go wasting it!"

"Then, just drink up from the place that it spills from, isn't that right?"

"That's just too unreasonable a request!" Though Garol said that, he still placed his mouth to the cup's edge and downed it in a mouthful.

Seeing how Garol was sporting enough to drink it in a way befitting a [Six Scars]' previous leader, Gry broke into a laugh after having sat silently listening to their conversation all this while.

"Dad's going to retire after this Harvest Festival. So let's drink our fill as part of our early celebration for him!"

"Nn. When the time comes for you to hold the retirement and official handing over ceremony, please invite me along. I will be there to return the favor for you visiting me when I'm recuperating."

Hearing Carol and Gry's words, Garol rubbed the back of his head bashfully.

On the other side of this conversation, Izayoi remembered something that almost slipped his mind until the matter of Garol's handing over was mentioned.

(I wonder if that chibi-sama …Has he succeeded in forming an Alliance?)

Part 3

---[Underwood] Conference Room, Evergreen Longhouse

To ratify the Alliance that they have discussed a few days ago, all three Communities have gathered in the Evergreen Longhouse.

Jin Russel and Percher to represent the [No Name]

Porol Gundark to represent the [Six Scars].

Jack-o-Lantern and Ayesha to represent the [Will-O'-Wisp].

Sitting around the round table, all of them took out their respective Alliance contract books.

Taking the initiative, Porol took up the contract book and said in a relaxed tone: "Let's do away with all the unnecessary niceties and just go straight to the confirmation of the contract books shall we?"

"Agreed."

"Yahoho! I'm all for it as well!" Jack and his bobbling pumpkin head laughed.

Porol nodded his head, with an apparent good mood, as he read out the contract details written on the book.

"[No Name] that owns the land rights, [Six Scars] that's in charge of the mining and collection of ores, [Will-O'-Wisp] that's in charge of the refining and processing. Excluding the manufacture of special products, the profit division would be 5:3:2. Is that all right?"

"Nn, that's good enough."

"Yahoho… That…That still sounds like an incredible amount will be divided between us."

Though this conference was very informal, the representatives were very serious about ratifying the Alliance details.

Especially Jack who was literally dancing when he heard about the details from Jin as he started shouting: "Our Community grounds! Our grounds can be rebuilt! The holes that leak when it rains can be patched! Yahohoho!" It seems without a doubt that they were in quite a mess.

"However, there's still one problem. The condition for the creation of an Alliance flag is [At least three Communities with their flags]. In other words, we would still require another Community to join our Alliance……How, now? Want to ask [Draco Greif] Alliance?"

"Yahoho! Regarding that matter, I've already had some headway in it. If you don't mind, just leave it to me to get it done."

The other two turned to look at Jack with surprise showing in their eyes.

Though [Will-O'-Wisp] was beginning to grow in fame, they still a newly founded Community created a few years ago. Even with that in mind, Jack was still confident enough to announce his capability in finding an Alliance member. Hence the cause of their surprise.

(…...But this shouldn't be too unexpected. After all, we too did not have a long history in our relations either.)

They had closer relations with [Six Scars] but it couldn't be counted as a deep and long one.

The only reason that allowed them to be brought together like this today was only due to the trust they had built up in the midst of battles against common foes.

"Are they trustworthy?" Jin voiced out his worry.

"You may rest easy on this matter. The reins of that Community is held firmly within our hands. As for its strength, I guess it is more or less guaranteed since they were once a level 5 Community."

Since they were originally a level 5 Community, their strength shouldn't be too shabby.

Jin gave a sigh of relief as he replied:

"Got it. Then we will leave it to you to arrange a date for all of us, Alliance Communities to meet up."

"Yahoho! I've got it covered!" Saluting with one hand, Jack nodded readily.

Porol reconfirmed the contract details before asking the other two Communities on the scene:

"Each Community's responsibilities will be as stated earlier, while the details for the fourth Community's contract will be left to another time to be discussed---As for……"

Porol's voice was slightly lowered at this point.

"Though this might not be an easy topic to bring up… but we cannot leave it without a finalization---Regarding the [Privilege of an Alliance] in the case of a Demon Lord's attack, what are the terms of use?"

Hearing the second part of Porol's words made Jin and Jack become serious.

Taking the lead again, Porol stood up and made his stand clear:

"I will be saying this in advance. We of [Six Scars] will not send aid for any games that have no chance of winning. Though the Alliance may be built upon the contract of blood, and there would sure be some blood lost before the wound closes, but I'm not going to mind being called a coward or lose my reputation if it means protecting my comrades from unnecessary sacrifices. For there's never a replacement for lives lost."

And with that kind of speech, Porol had sufficiently displayed his determination to be pay the cost of being looked down on.

He understood clearly that out of the Alliance Communities, [Six Scars] was the most lacking in firepower. Even if it's area of influence and population is the biggest, that didn't mean a thing when it comes to battling with Demon Lords.

Because it was a well-known fact, Jin and Jack quietly nodded their heads in assent.

"No problem, I understand that. Though the Alliance is important…. It is still wise to place your Community's interest before all else."

"*Aiya, Aiya* I agree with him. To throw aside one's own interest to save other people is not befitting for a Community leader." As his words fell, Jack's eyes lit up brighter with an inner fire.

"Moreover if we interpret from your words, we can understand it as [Aid will be given if there is a chance of winning]. And with that promise, I already think that it is enough."

"Haha, your ears are quite sharp…Oh well, in those situations, we will definitely send aid no matter the number of obstacles between. I swear upon the flag and honor of [Six Scars]. You guys can accept this condition right?"

Jack nodded his head readily at that.

But their attention was soon attracted by Jin who silently rose to his feet.

"I've no problems about that condition being abided by your Communities. However, we of [No Name] are determined to take part in every battle as long as you provide the details on how we may provide assistance."

"What?!" Porol exclaimed loudly.

This was to be expected as that condition sounded exactly like the previous contract between a Master and Slave.

To use the blood of one's own comrades in exchange for the Community's interest.

Jin had already worked hard and it was more than enough to prevent that kind of route already.

"……I guess you two would have heard of it already that we [No Name]'s true goal is to retrieve our Flag and Name. And for that, we would be required to defeat the Demon Lord that has provoked our enmity."

"…so?"

"Our Community needs to grow stronger. Hence we set our path to battle any Demon Lords as long as there is a request for aid. So I ask of you to let [No Name] to be of assistance and for you to be of assistance to our goal."

"That is too vague, could you just speak your mind?" Porol seemed to be a little irritated as he urged Jin.

It was a conflict of ideology here. Porol did not believe that anything could be more important than the lives of one's own comrades even if the other party wanted to help others. When hearing Jin's words, Porol couldn't help but get agitated.

Jin turned to Percher taking from her the bag that he had left to her to safeguard and retrieving from it two sharp Spear tips.

"What are those? Tips of a spear blade?"

"Yes. It's one of the weapon parts that lie dormant within the recesses of our Weaponry Storage Room. The blade tips of [Brionac]."

At once, the faces of the other two paled and they couldn't help but stand up.

"Bri…Brionac's spear tip?"

"The spear that is well known as the bringer of victory due to its true aim?"

Jin nodded.

---[Brionac] is the strongest holy spear from the Celtic Mythology and had a total of 5 spear tips.

The holy spear, possessed a similar ability as the Gift [Indra Spear] which was the tangible form of victory, can shoot out five intense light beams that is comparable to the Sun's energy output to pierce the enemy who will not be able to hide from it.

"Is it…. Is it real?.... Though it is said that there isn't anything that does not exist in Little Garden, but I've always thought that this spear only existed in mythologies."

"Yahoho…. Me too."

"But when we have only two pieces, it becomes quite worthless. There's a total of five spear tips for the spear. The only way for the spear [Brionac] to be resurrected will be to collect the 5 pieces together."

"So… So that's it? Then why did you show it to us?"

Porol asked with disappointment written all over his face. Jack's thoughts would most likely be the same.

"I've brought these as proof--- proof that our Armory still holds a HUGE QUANTITY of weapons of THIS LEVEL that are just lying undisturbed for years."

"….what?!"

"Our only regret is that these weapons all require a wielder who has met the specific conditions of passing through certain tests or trainings---Hence, we came upon an idea. To use the famous weapons that lie dormant in the Armory to CONSTRUCT A STRONGER ORIGINAL WEAPON."

This time, both their expressions changed to that of shock.

Especially for Porol, the impact of the shock had shaken him to his core since he was able to understand the entity of Jin's words.

"Yahoho……You mean to forge legendary type weapon imitations like [Perseus]-----"

"No. Jack, that's not it. Jin meant to create an original type of weapon---By judging his comrade's skills and forging the strongest weapon that will best suit their needs!"

Jack who heard Porol's clarification was stumped for words.

Jin also firmly nodded his head in assent. To bring out the full potential in his comrade's battle skills was his way of supporting his comrades as the leader of the Community.

(……Looks like Jin is prioritizing the strengthening of his comrade's fighting abilities before the funds obtainable from the trade of Diamond Iron Ore.)

To continue improving on their best selling point. That was the motto of the [No Name]s.

Even so, Porol gave a wry smile.

"That's easier said than done. We have to collect many more materials and Gifts besides the Diamond Iron Ore that we have."

"I know that. So, we hope that [Six Scars] will provide information on Gift Games that offer up Strong Gifts as prizes."

"……Nn. Being a merchant Community, the obtaining of information should not be a problem. However, even with the materials gathered,……is [Will-O'-Wisp] really able to utilize it and create those items you require?"

Porol sneered in Jack's direction.

With the usual smile wiped off Jack's face, he crossed his arms in deep thought.

---Though Mythological weapons were strong, they had many restrictions on the wielder that's allowed to touch it. Jin's suggestion was to bypass that flaw. However, that would make the success of his plan lie heavily on the skills of Jack. The question now was: Would Jack be able to live up to the task or not.

Though Jack's character may seem very carefree and joke around often, he's actually a deep thinker who's a strategist in his Community. From his perspective, he would take all considerations of his Community's future seriously and place all matters on a Balance to have an accurate reading for the best possible course of action.

Staring at the materials before him, he softly mumbled:

"…Sir Jin Russel"

"Ye,Yes."

"We of [Will-O'-Wisp] are currently being targeted by the [Maxwell Demon Lord] and with that in mind, would you still be willing to stand by us in battle?"

The sudden revelation caused Jin and Porol to exclaim loudly:

" [Maxwell Demon Lord]……isn't he the strongest Demon Lord of the Level 5 North regions?"

"Is that for real? You guys are real lucky to have survived this long."

"Yea. We have driven him away before, with success …but that fellow's still eyeing us recently, obviously up to no good…Even so, would [No Name] still be willing to stand by us to fight together?"

A raging flame was lighted within the depths of the pumpkin shell head.

Jin couldn't help but draw a sharp breath under the sudden strong pressure emitted from the other party. But he knew that this was a test that he must show that he was just as determined.

"…A gentleman doesn't take back his words. As long as [Will-O'-Wisp] is able to forge us the best weapons and accessories, we of [No Name] will rush forth to provide assistance under the flag of raging hell flames."

As his words fell on their ears, the contract documents of the Alliance had that new line added.

Placing his hand upon the Contract documents, Jack also took an oath unto himself.

"I hereby swear that I will use the Flames of Hell to forge the best equipment for you guys."

As their gazes met, they nodded and sealed their vows.

Porol started to pout as he felt left out.

"……what's happening? Now it makes me look like I'm the only one who's a brat around here."

"Yahoho. How can it be?! Porol's words had also carried some important points that were noteworthy!"

"But just a little too sour on the ears and not easily palatable for some."

Jin's words only succeeded in making Porol's veins pop near his temples.

But he had no complains and merely gave a light sigh.

"I give up. If you guys have given it that much thought, I will be more than willing to help. Allow me to be frank. With [No Name]'s battle prowess as a guarantee, it's really quite a relief for me."

"Yahoho! Though I do not know if I can meet your expectations, I will use my skills to the fullest to forge equipments that will feel at home in their hands!"

"Rea..Really Thank You!"

Jin's face broke into an earnest smile as he thanked Jack with a bow.

The three of them shook hands firmly. Signifying the ratification of their thoughts.

---The Alliance between [No Name], [Six Scars] and [Will-O'-Wisp] has been formed, while the finalization of the Alliance name and flag were to be postponed till the joining of the fourth Community. And with that, they ended the talks for the day.

Interlude 2

---[Underwood] Harvest Festival General Headquarters

Six chairs were prepared for the round table located within one of the rooms in the General Headquarters.

As part of the representatives' responsibilities, the leaders of the sub-Communities of the [Draco Greif] Alliance were to gather and cast their votes for the electing of the next [Floor Master].

However, there were only four people that sat at the table for six:

[One Horn] Leader, Sala Doltrake.

[Two Wings] Leader, Griffith Greif.

[Six Scars] Leader, Porol Gundark.

And the one who's in charge of providing valuable opinions: [Great Sage who Devastates Seas] Kouryuu. Those were the people present at the table.

The other three Communities had passed their Power of Attorneys to each of the Community Leaders who had turned up and conveniently decided not to show up.

Being the youngest in this kind of awkward situation, Porol was already feeling the hint of a headache coming over him.

(What are those old geezers playing at?!... Why did they give a Power of Attorney to [Six Scars] that is soon to withdraw from the Alliance! Horrid! May you geezers choke on a mochi from the Harvest Festival stalls and/or die with alcohol

intoxication. Not that dying from diabetes or etc. is any worse a choice as long as they are gone….!)

Cursing with all the curses that could be found from the three thousand and more worlds, Porol silently piled curses upon curses for the three leaders that did not turn up. With that said, it wasn't as though Porol couldn't understand the reason behind their actions.

Even with the Power of Attorney given to him, [Six Scars] who were going to leave the Alliance wouldn't be able to appoint themselves as a candidate for [Floor Master]. Hence they had made it such to split the Power of Attorneys evenly and leave the final choice up to [Six Scars].

And on the occasion that someone decides to disagree with the choice, [Six Scars] was going to leave the Alliance either way and the dissatisfaction would not have a target to be vented on within the Alliance.

(Looks like it was a wise choice to have accepted Jin's offer……)

Haiz Porol sighed.

Griffith who was irritated by how Porol's slow decision making, urged him to hurry his choice:

"[Six Scars], what are you still pondering about? If you can't make a choice between us, then just let it be settled with a test of strength between [Two Wings] and [One Horn]! Didn't we reach that understanding a long time ago?!"

"Yeah. I did get it the first time…"

Using a game to decide in the case where votes are equal was the way of those who lived in Little Garden. And it could also be said as the least complicated way of life in Little Garden. If it were a fair fight, Porol would never have any qualms about accepting the idea. But he had questions about the game that was said to be used for this election.

“As I’ve asked before, what does [Two Wings] suggest as the game to determine the strengths of the candidates?”

“We will just fight it out in the game [Rider of Hippocamp] that’s hosted tomorrow. The victor would then inherit the [Horn of Draco Greif] and be able to display their strength. Isn’t that just like killing two birds with one stone?”

(When you put it that way, of course it would sound good.) Porol lamented silently.

The minimum requirement of a [Floor Master] would be their strength or there would be no need for further discussion on the matter. But if there were another way around this, Porol would rather not choose this method.

(To ask Sala Onee-san to take the stage of battle when she’s recovering from her injury wasn’t much about fighting but the desire to win!)

To tell the truth, Porol wanted to vote for Sala.

Though Griffith did have the strength, he lacked the calmness for decision-making. And Porol judged Sala Doltrake to be the better choice for he believed she has what it takes to unite the Alliance successfully.

But Porol was not that shallow and knew better than to choose based on the character of a person.

What Porol also feared was what might happen after the Harvest Festival. If word got out that the newly appointed [Floor Master] had been chosen from such a crappy race, Porol just didn't want to know how others might react to it….

If it were to be settled by a duel, it should only be held when both parties were feeling well-rested and at their best condition or it might leave room for regrets. Especially for [One Horn] to be forced to join the game that was disadvantageous to them…it would just be a public humiliation.

(In addition, Sala Onee-san had quite a grievous wound recently and to recover fully would require a few months…or maybe even a few years.)

But there was no more time to spare in the choosing of a new [Floor Master].

Moreover, one had to remember the fact that Sala had lost one of her dragon horns, whether or not she recovers fully. Her strength at best would be much decreased to Griffith's level or even below.

(With things looking so bad, I might as well prepare myself for the worst revenge to come and just elect Sala Onee-san.)

The reason for the choice would be written down as "This is because Griffith does not have what it takes to lead!" or something similar that would act as fire to the gunpowder.

If he really did that, [Six Scars] will have to drop off cleanly with the Alliance and cut off all ties……However, Porol knew that he should go about this situation very carefully as that sort of move would surely bring trouble to Sala.

Just as he was getting frustrated at his predicament that he couldn't seem to solve----Kouryuu who had sat silently all these while suddenly stood up and gave a suggestion:

"Hey, Porol. If we add some conditions to it, wouldn't it be fine to use his proposition?"

"Shi……Shifu, what are you saying?!"

Porol couldn't help his exclamation at his Shifu due to the pent up frustrations.

Griffith didn't miss the opportunity to voice his assent.

"Being able to see the future for the Alliance, as expected of a consultant."

"NnNn. I'm just unwilling to see the Alliance that Draco placed much effort in to build up getting torn apart. If it were to be solved in an easy manner, I would be all for it…However, I would like to change the conditions of the game."

A wide smile with his lips parting a little was plastered across Kouryuu's face. Knowing that smile to be one of his Shifu's [I'm up to something] smiles, he relented and played along:

"……and what is the condition that Shifu wants?"

"Oh, it's not a strange condition to request. Isn't the game [Rider of Hippocamp] open to other participants as well? To compete in a game is a good thing……Just that, since it's a game to determine the next [Floor Master], both of your Communities must be confident in obtaining the victory right?"

The smile and gaze that Kouryuu used, had a power that could pierce through a person's defenses. So strong was his gaze that it caused Griffith to shudder involuntarily.

At the moment that he had heard the question, Porol understood what his Shifu was getting at and followed up on his words.

"Oh yeah, that's right Shifu. After all, this is a battle to elect the next [Floor Master] and being the guardians of the South, They would have to display their strength."

"That's right. But if……Nn, Just take it as something that I do not believe might happen. What if the candidates failed to win the game…wouldn't it be a huge embarrassment?" Kouryuu widened his eyes and filled it with a pressurizing sense of threat and challenge.

Even if he had been a recluse that wandered around for many years, his gaze was unquestionably one that carried the might of a Demon King. Griffith who was the receiver of this gaze had his back slick with sweat. Though there clearly wasn't anything wrong with what this guy had suggested, his stare was already sufficient to cause his own body to emit fear from his sweat pores.

(Damnable Demon Lord! Just wait till I get my hands on the [Draco Greif's Horn]. For you will be the first whom I will dispose of!)

Using his murderous hatred to still his fear, Griffith started to think of a line for a comeback.

Sala who had been silent all these while suddenly spoke up:

"---Then, let's allow the victor of the game [Rider of Hippocamp] to decide on the next [Floor Master]. If it's Griffith who wins, then he would just need to nominate himself."

"Huh? What kind of nonsense is that?! What happens if it's some unknown fellow who appears out of nowhere and just happens to win the game?"

"There no need for worry because there can only be one winner. Our heroes---[No Name] and no one else. If they were up to them to choose, I'm sure that no one will object."

Sala spoke those words while making it sound like a matter of fact as her trust in the [No Name]s' abilities were solid. Having fought alongside them in the battle of the huge dragon, she came to understand more than anyone else how strong their abilities and capabilities were.

"And due to my faith in their victory, I will make the rules as such:

1. If [No Name] is victorious, the nomination of the [Floor Master]' shall be left to them to choose from the Alliance.

2. If it is a Community besides [No Name] that wins, Griffith will be nominated the next [Floor Master].

---How does it sound? To get rid of them and win at the same time. There shouldn't be a better proposition for you right?"

Throwing back her long and fiery-red hair, Sala gave a confident smile.

The sense of humiliation stirred by her words caused Griffith's shoulders to tremble.

"Were you trying to imply that my Community [Two Wings] will…….lose to some lowly trash Community like the [No Name]?"

"Oh? So you mean that a mere Community like [Two Wings] can win against our heroes? Insults and arrogance should end here. You **H-O-R-S-E-M-E-A-T**."

In a flash, the air crackled with static as lightning shot into the room and seeming like a sharpened spear, it homed in on Sala's heart.

Immediately responding to the situation, Sala brought her foot up and flipped the table towards Griffith.

The table that got struck by the lightning was immediately changed into a fiery wall that stood between them. Having half reverted his upper torso to his Hippogriff appearance, he fixed his beady glare on Sala.

"……Okay! But applying the same rules is sufficient! For I will win by my own strength! If another Community wins, it will be their call! But you must keep in mind that when I become [Floor Master], this Alliance will not tolerate your presence!"

"And I hereby hand those exact same words back to you."

Sala patted the dust off herself while Griffith summoned a pillar of water that doused the flames of the round table before leaving in a fit.

Watching the receding shadow with mixed feelings, Kouryuu muttered: "*Haiz* ……Griffith sure is easy to read."

"Nn. It seems like he hasn't notice how conveniently [No Name]s became my stand-in. He's so gullible that even I'm at a loss for words."

Sala covered her mouth as she started to giggle.

It was only then did Porol catch on to the stage that these two had set up for the play.

“Shifu and Sala Onee-san……are in cahoots?”

“Hahaha! Isn’t it a bit late to have caught on now, my beloved disciple?”

“Sorry. It’s all because the other party was on guard against my movements and wanted me to stay away from you Porol… But it was fortunate that Kouryuu-san had helped me to come up with such a plan and it helped me a lot. If not for it, I would still be worrying about how to continue being in the position of representative.”

Sala smiled at Kouryuu in relief.

However, Porol felt the exact opposite feeling growing uneasily in him due to her words.

(It wasn’t Sala who asked for help…. But an initiative from Shifu to come up with the proposition?)

---The Saurian Demon King who’s often described jokingly as a ‘Floating withered log’ has actually done such a thing?

Though Porol felt uneasy with this development, but it had ended well and there was nothing to complain about.

Realizing how disrespectful his line of thoughts were towards his Shifu, he silently berated himself for it just as the Alliance meeting was dismissed just like this.

Chapter 7

Part 1

---[Rider of Hippocamp] Participants waiting area.

The skies were clear and it was a lovely morning. Though there were a few scattered patches of dark clouds hovering in the horizon around dawn that seemed to promise sporadic rain over South Side, they were gone by the time the intense Sun rays broke through dawn and shone over the city of [Underwood].

The start point was set at the Great Tree's floodgates and the participants were all in high spirits as they waited for the start of the race.

However, during this lively and boisterous occasion---Izayoi and the other [No Name] members were gathered in front of their changing tent that was assigned for each of the participating Communities as they listened to Jin's recount of the happenings the night before.

"---The above is the request from Sala-sama and Porol. Since we already have a debt to repay to [Two Wings], we must win this race no matter what."

The victor held the authority to appoint the next [Floor Master].

Izayoi and the others gave a seemingly frustrated sigh in response.

"I see… Sala actually gave us such an interesting and troublesome drudgery to accomplish."

"At least make sure to tell us earlier! I'm seriously worried now…"

"It looks like we can only ask Sala to be prepared to treat us with some delicious food for repayment."

Hearing that, Izayoi and Asuka gave a wry smile as the same question sprang to their minds: (Yō hadn't had her fill yet?)

"But come to think about it…to have all the female contestants who rent the Hippocamp to wear swimsuits…Shiroyasha sure does come up with some constructive thoughts albeit rarely."

As Izayoi said it with much emotions leaking into his words, he began to admire the sight of Asuka and Yō in their swim wear.

Asuka wore the same Bikini matched with a pareo tied around her waist just like yesterday. The sight of those developing breasts held great promise though they were already good enough for now added with the snowy white skin that peeked out from the covers of the pareo made it seem more sensuous and ran contrary to the whole idea to cover more of herself. Seeing Asuka in such a daring swimsuit compared to the usual Asuka who would wear conservative clothes, it sure gave a refreshing feel.

Whereas Yō had chosen a two piece swimsuit. Though her body was exactly like what her age would have implied, without the filling out of curves, her slim figure was very proportionate. And precisely due to the two piece swimsuit, it actually accentuates on her slim body-lines and was much more charming than a bikini.

……Noticing how Izayoi was scrutinizing them in detail, Asuka's face blushed furiously as she stared back at him.

"Hey. Don't stare at us. Don't you think you've looked for too long?"

"What nonsense is that? There's no point in wearing swimsuits if no one is around to admire it. And I would daresay that you two look quite sexy." Izayoi gave a thumbs up while Asuka's face blushed even more in embarrassment.

Whereas Yō responded with a thumbs up at Izayoi's direction.

Just when these three idiots ended their conversation, Kuro Usagi who went into the tent to change said in a muffled voice:

"So…Sorry for the wait…"

And with that, only two rabbit ears poked out of the tent flap. The reddish tinge on those rabbit ears was definitely not an illusion.

Yō and Asuka who had finished changing into their swimsuits for quite some time couldn't suppress their impatience anymore as they grabbed a bunny ear each---

"Heave-oh"

"Waaaaahhhhh!"

Kuro Usagi was helplessly dragged out of the tent flaps and that move caused Kuro Usagi's breasts to wobble lusciously.

"…Ooo?"

Izayoi's eyes were attracted by the wobbling breasts and he trained his eyes on them.

Kuro Usagi's swimsuit was a very sensuous piece of bikini that had cute frills on the edges.

Boldly exposing the snow white skin, this piece of swimsuit was impartial to the amount of skin that it exposed, be it the well-developed thighs or breasts, it showed more skin than usual. Though the breasts and thighs were fleshy, the overall feel of that body was one that's well-proportioned and not one that was flawed as a result of those fleshy parts. In fact, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that she had the figure of a model.

The baby face that ran contrary to the voluptuous body, stole their breaths away for a while.

"……Izayoi-san, the use of the term "look quite sexy" would best describe this kind of figure."

"What nonsense is that? This is called pornographic."

"Nn, quite porno…"

"Y…You guys don't have any other comments….?"

Kuro Usagi didn't even have strength for a comeback line as her cheeks and ears were red to their tips.

For the pure-minded Kuro Usagi to wear such a 'high level' revealing swimsuit, it would have required much courage. It was no wonder that she got depressed by their conversation that kept revolving around such vulgar words to describe her.

Seeming to sense her mood, Izayoi smiled and decided to add another comment to the many already said.

"Hey, just bring out your confidence. Even if I looked around the whole of [Underwood], I swear that you, Kuro Usagi, will still be the cutest girl around."

"…Is…Is it, really?"

The honest comment caused her ears to redden further. It may just be her over imagination but Kuro Usagi felt that her heart was beating wildly.

Not too long after this, a bell rang to gather all the contestants to the side of the river.


春日部耀
黒ウサギ
久遠飛鳥
ゲーム開始前に、まず一言。黒ウサギは、実にエロいな！
さっさと開始してください このお馬鹿ッ!!
――というわけでッ！収穫祭のメインゲーム〝ヒッポカンプの騎手〟は、全員の水着着用を義務とするッ!!!

Part 2

---[Rider of Hippocamp] Underground City Audience Stands

The banquet was still on for the third day in a row during the Harvest Festival.

Drinking till falling asleep and waking with a hangover before drinking again till falling asleep. To be able to continue this cycle of unhealthy living, was a type of charm only found during the Harvest Festival.

And one of the most awaited event would be the live broadcast screening of the [Rider of Hippocamp] at the cliff surface by the little group demons: [Laplace Little Demons].

---A [Laplace's demon] held the ability of premonition. And the [Laplace's little Demons] that were a group demon held the position at the peak of the [Laplace's demon]s for they possessed powers of processing information that would far exceed any other and held the ability of transferring all information collected to the Demon's main body.

And since the main body is currently sleeping, they can only use their skills for this task.

[Acting like a light projector to screen real time collected information]---that was their part-time job. This ability to screen a live telecast of Gift Games was definitely popular and well-received by the residents of Little Garden.

Take this race for example, those who did not participate in the event could also join the fun with a little gambling.

And there were quite a number who held their betting tickets in their hands while standing at the stands.

Walking amongst the heated crowd, three young girls in their swimsuits carried boxes that contained drinks and chilled fruit puddings for sale, while calling to advertise for their products occasionally.

And they were---

Lily, who was practically beaming with smiles as she wagged her tails enthusiastically.

Percher, who could not muster up any enthusiasm.

And Leticia, who had worn a straw hat that was pulled low over her face.


ペスト
……斑模様でも、黒死病にかかりませんよー
レース観戦のお供に〝斑梨〟のジュースはいかがですかー？
レティシア
リリ

"Would you like a cup of [Spotted Pear] juice to quench your thirst? There's also other chilled fruit puddings and fruits! They've just been chilled and are cool, crunchy and soothing to the throat♪"

"…Though it is spotted, you needn't worry about getting Black Death~"

"When it comes from your mouth, it's not funny. Not that any of your other words are, so just stop it."

Leticia tugged her straw hat lower as she chided Percher while being very self-conscious about having her identity exposed.

Percher muttered her complains and sighed as she resumed her task with less enthusiasm than before.

It would seem that the only one who was enthusiastic and enjoying herself would be Lily who had just sold another of those [Spotted Pear] chilled products.

"Thank you for the patronage!"

"Ah, it just seems right since you girls are giving your best as well."

"Hey, I would like one too!"

Swish! Lily's ears perked up as she hurried over. At this point in time, it would even be believable if one said that a perpetual motion machine could be found within her body to allow her to continue working with such energy in her steps.

An expressionless Percher finally sold one as well before she turned to ask Leticia:

"But what's this about? I thought that you weren't coming?"

"That was definitely what I thought as well…but Lily came crying to me for help saying that if it were to be left as it is, she wouldn't be able to meet the required funds or something……"

Before Leticia could finish her words, the live broadcasters had already arrived on the stage.

Standing at the edge of the stage, the live broadcaster was no other than the one who wore a white wafuku, Shiroyasha and the one charged with the task of watching over her superior, the female shop assistant. Upon a closer look, one would notice the microphone in Shiroyasha's hand and realize that the disastrous god is going to start something once more.

"Sorry for the wait, Everyone! The Gift game [Hippocamp Riders] will now commence! And the judge is someone whom everyone is familiar with---Kuro Usagi----"

"WOOO

"WOOO



Part 3

---[Hippocamp Riders] Live screening projection location beside the stage.

Shiroyasha was happily enjoying the praise and respect that was coming from the crowd while zooming into various angles of Kuro Usagi's butt to be shown on the screen.

"It's so impressive!...To think that [Moon Rabbit]s in their second growth stage at 200 years old can develop such a sexy figure…. Oh my…. It's really great! Don't you think so too?"

"…I don't care!"

The female shop assistant replied in a tone that was filled with a fierceness that was five times that she usually used in the shop.

Having worn a bikini instead of her usual Japanese style apron and wafuku, she had followed Shiroyasha on the stage to the projection area. It was probably due to Shiroyasha's orders that she could not defy. And it was plain as day that she was very angry to the point where one could feel the waves of anger rolling off her.

But from an objective point of view, seeing her in a swimsuit also held a kind of charm.

The skin that was usually covered by her working attire was unblemished and beautiful as with those breasts that gave her a very womanly feel and looked just right.

The female shop assistant with her long hair flowing free of its usual bun like Kanzashi restrains, seemed like a freshly bloomed flower that stirred up feelings of love and affection.

Turning to the crowd, Shiroyasha's eye appraised her subordinate silently. When she was satisfied by the result of her new image-changing plan on her subordinate, she waved to the crowd and contestants as she said:

"So~Everyone! Before the game starts, I have some words for you---Kuro Usagi you look really sexy!"

"Please hurry up with the starting of the game! You DaiAho!"

A stone thrown from the stage struck Shiroyasha's head from behind and instantly caused blood to flow from the spot.

It must have been due to the lack of reach of the paper fan. But Shiroyasha ignored the stone that was still stuck to her head, that looked seriously painful, as she *Ahem* to clear her throat to attract everyone's attention once more.

"Well then really to just say one line---Kuro Usagi's really se….."

-*Pak! Puk! Toin!*-

"Nn, I think I should just get back to the main topic for I wouldn't want to receive any more pain than this. I guess everyone already knows that in this Harvest Festival, my Community [Thousand Eyes] have set up quite a few of our stalls! But regrettably, we hadn't helped in the preparation of the game. And so I had this idea……I hereby proclaim that the participant who can laugh till the end in [Hippocamp Riders] shall receive a prize from [Thousand Eyes]!"

As Shiroyasha announced triumphantly, the audience stands erupted into cheers as well as small clusters of sighing in regret that they have not joined the event. The participants awaiting the start of the event were the same as the atmosphere around them was getting tense with their fired up hearts aiming for the win.

Asuka couldn't help but be affected by the mood of the people around here as she tightened her hold of the reins. Looking towards Faceless who was quite a distance away, she once again set her determination.

[We must win this one to allow Sala to stay in her current position. No matter who the opponent is, I cannot allow them to be an obstacle in my way!]

Asuka looked towards the people standing at the two banks, Izayoi, Yō and the Shirayuki-hime who was forced to join the event and they met gazes and nodded to each other.

Kuro Usagi moved to the take the centre stage to read out the rules.

"The following will be the last time which Kuro Usagi will read out the [Hippocamp Riders] Game rules!

1. Any contestant that falls into the river will be immediately disqualified! But it is acceptable to be on the river bank or the ground!
2. All forward progress must be in the river! Upon entering the Forest of Al Pisano, you will be met with a fork in the river. Please proceed based on your instincts!
3. Upon reaching the checkpoint on the mountain apex, you will have to pluck a [Sea Tree] fruit that is native to that region before returning to the start point to finish!

And those three are the rules as stated!"

Spreading her arms wide when Kuro Usagi ended her announcement, Shiroyasha prepared herself for the final announcement:

"Well then, to all the contestants! Retrieve the specified item and return with a speed that outstrips all others! I hereby declare the Gift game [Hippocamp Riders] to be STARTED!"

Part 4

---Just as the signal was given to start, flashes of reflected light glinting off a sword's surface lit the area.

At the same moment that Shiroyasha clapped to signal the start of the event, Faceless had pulled out her Serpens Scorpius Sword and hacked her surrounding contestants to the floor---

No. To put it accurately, she did not harm even a single strand of their hair.

The masked rider had---reduced the contestants' swimsuits to shreds in a flash!

"Yi Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Screams and chaos erupted in the next second. Not caring about the situation, the contestants that had their swimsuits shredded jumped into the water one after the other as they tried to protect their modesty in the waters. A few guys were wearing plate armor, but Faceless had even gone to the extent of cutting along the chinks in the armor to shatter it. Showing no mercy and rendering them defenseless.

Whereas the [Mizugi shredding Demon] continued to move forth at a leisurely pace and shredding more of the contestants' clothes and or armors. She wore a mask and no one could see her expression, but it needn't much thought to know that it must be quite a scary looking expression she had right now. And though it was quite a frightening stunt she pulled on them, one must also applaud this exceptional stunt that she pulled out on the other contestants.

On the other hand, Asuka had survived, albeit narrowly escaping just by a stone thrown in the nick of time by Izayoi. But her will to fight was wavering due to the fearsome stunt pulled off by the masked rider.

(What….What a devious act….)

Representative of the Purdah females---Kudou Asuka was frightened to the point of quivering.

Throwing aside one's sense of shame just for the best route to victory?

Or was it the way of all [Queen Halloween] loyalists to discard their feelings to this extent?

In any way, the decision to dive under was a stupid but best solution since it was the best method in this Gift game.

The commentator of the race, Kuro Usagi was rendered speechless by the shamelessness of the race scene.

Shiroyasha of the broadcasting section was the exact opposite as she was just as hyped up as the audiences.

"Ha! As expected of the rider chosen by my rival! That cold judgement and wonderful sword skills to only shred the swimsuits! Though she's still a loyal subject of my rival, I just can't help but to offer up some praises! Or should I say Gambatte! Yahoooo!!"

"Yahooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo~~~!"

(……They really are a big group of stupid people])

Initially, Kuro Usagi was feeling very much embarrassed about her swimsuit…..but now she was really glad that she wasn't one of those who had joined the event.

Part 5

--- On the river bank, taking the lead for the Supporting group.

A herd of Hippocamp churned up lots of water spray as they travelled forward in the river.

Due to Faceless's stunt, the contestants have been reduced to a mere one tenth of the original number. And thanks to her, Izayoi and the other supporters' battle had quickly ended, further reducing the contestants by another 50%. Izayoi, who threw the stone to help Asuka, was running while laughing to the point of clutching his sides.

"What was that about! That masked fellow! Was actually an interesting person!"

"Hey, aruji! This isn't the time to joke around! That woman was the one who shredded my clothes!"

Shirayuki-hime's voice came from a Gift card held by Izayoi.

Without being able to get out of the way of Faceless's sword slashes, her swimsuit had been shredded. But just a moment after the shreds fell away, she had escaped into a Gift Card like a rabbit diving into its burrow.

"But isn't it such a waste? I never expected that the subordinate relation you have with me will be such a troublesome thing."

"Are you a Baka or what! I would rather commit seppuku than let other random people lay their eyes on my body."

"Oh? But I've seen it all."

"……"

Shirayuki-hime fell silent, seemingly throwing a tantrum.

Izayoi's tongue may be unforgiving, but he would not deny the fact that Shirayuki-hime would have been a great help for Asuka.

After all, Shirayuki-hime is a water god to say the least, but being forced to retire so early in the game would leave much of a problem in the later portion of the game.

To grasp the latest news, the contestants had to constantly keep an ear out for Kuro Usagi's commentary.

"Currently there are five groups in the lead! Taking the lead is [Will-O'-Wisp]'s Faceless! Followed by [No Name]'s Kudou Asuka! Third to fifth positions are currently taken by Riders of [Two Wings] that are pursuing relentlessly!"

While running along the river bank, Izayoi digested the information in detail.

It would seem that Griffith had registered multiple teams from [Two Wings] for the event.

To leave them be in the race would be quite a bother and it would make perfect sense to rid of them early…To tell the truth, even if it wasn't about the race, he also wanted to get rid of them.

Izayoi was educated in this way from childhood---When punched, pay back with twice the punches. If insulted and shamed, pay back ten thousand times before calling it even.

(Though it may be so, if I do not continue to help out here, there shouldn't be any other way to defeat that masked rider right?)

How do I go about this? Izayoi racked his brains for a solution.

At this point, the race was still on and the situation on-scene was changing.

"The leading groups have reached the conflux of the river at the Forest of Al Pisano! It is now time for them to make the decision between the two paths before them, for it would be the choice that would determine their victory or defeat! So please believe wholeheartedly in your instincts and go forth!"

Continuing to go against the flow of the river, they finally reached the Forest of Al Pisano.

The dense canopy overhead weaved together so closely that it blocked all sunlight from sifting through, forming a dark and shadowy forest. And that made it worse for Izayoi if something did happen and required his assistance since it would be difficult to protect Asuka as effectively in here.

"Hey! Oujo-sama! Move closer here and choose the narrower canals if possible!"

"Got it!"

Asuka used her reins to steer her Hippocamp closer to the river bank that Izayoi was running along. Just as Asuka wanted to relay the message to Yō and turned her head to the other opposite river bank---There was naught a soul in sight.

"…Kasukabe?"

Though Asuka had much questions in mind about Yō's disappearance, she did not stop her Hippocamp.

And so the two of them continued to progress further into the depths of Al Pisano forest.

Part 6

---Forest of Al Pisano, [Two Wings] chosen route.

Many eudemons could be seen resting near the river banks along the tangle of undergrowth that grew unrestrained in the forest. Moving further North beyond the safety of the sea of trees, one would find the remains of a small lake. It is said that a HanBa demonic beast that resided there had caused it to dry up and hence the eudemons had to evacuate into the safety of the forest and had to share the limited space with each other as their population was relatively high.

As the [Two Wings]s made a tight formation to travel in the middle of the river, they could also faintly hear the sounds of other eudemons breathing in the forest.

Griffith was acting as a supporter in his Eudemon form for the game.

Even if he had the ability to anthropomorphize, he just couldn't stand completing the race in the appearance of a Human. Hence choosing to be a supporter to finish off other riders from the air while another person took the position of his team's rider. And since majority of the contestants were already finished off by Faceless, he could now focus on protecting his own rider.

(The route that has a shorter cut through the sea of trees has been controlled by us! Those fools can go wander around in the sea of trees till they are satisfied!)

The Eudemon teams were moving upstream against the flow of the Forest's river.

Griffith led two other winged members in the air while five others were guarding the riders from the river banks. In Gift games, it's important for the team to be united as it would be a valuable asset. If a Community could keep a talented individual, they would definitely stand a better chance in Gift games.

To plan an ambush on this group that was maintaining an all-round defence would be more than difficult. Moreover, the members of [Two Wings] had extraordinary eyesight, the eyes of predatory birds. A Front Scout and back guard with night-vision eyes helped to secure the area in the sea of trees, making it almost impeccable. And that was the might of the weapon called [Unity].

---But the condition before all that would be "If up against a normal person".

"Gri…Griffith-sama---!"

"What's the matter?"

"There's a shining light ahead!"

There was a small figure that was giving out a mesmerizing glittery light. But just when they noticed the human figure to it, two of the winged flank guards were blasted into the river before they could even bat an eyelid.

"Wh…What?"

Two huge water sprays erupted in the middle of the wide river while the Hippocampi also started to whinny in fright.

The riders had pulled back their reins to calm their steeds before continuing but Griffith immediately admonish them loudly:

"No Stopping! You fools! Urge them forward immediately!"

"No…It's impossible! If it continued, we would surely be thrown off our steeds!"

Clicking his tongue in frustration, Griffith prepared himself for battle. He already guessed who their antagonist was. There weren't many people who could give off such a glittery whirlwind in Little Garden after all.

Spreading his Eagle wings while summoning electrified whirlwinds around himself, he tried to scare off the attacker.

"Are you here to clear the grudges of the other day, little girl---?!"

Just as he howled in rage, their antagonist--- Kasukabe Yō had instantly moved and appeared before his very eyes.

Wearing the [Pegasus] Leg Guards constructed from the [Genome Tree], Yō stood in the way of all the [Two Wing]s group.

Thrusting out her chest proudly, she replied with confidence: "……Nah. There's nothing for me to take revenge about. This is just about tactically defeating you."

"……How dare you look down on me to that extent!"

Lightning raged around Griffith as his temper grew hotter. But Yō's words were true to some extent. When she surveyed the area from above, she had come to realize that the short cut had been taken by [Two Wings].

Having lived their lives in [Underwood] for a long time should have given them the topological advantage over the others and Yō used that to be a fair point in consideration added to her instincts to confront them and defeat them before they make it to the checkpoint.

"Give up the idea of moving a step forward from there."

"Talking big now eh? Little female primate!"

Unleashing his anger, Griffith controlled his lightning to combine it with his whirlwind and water techniques as he launched his attack together with his five subordinates.

Flying with the help of the glittery whirlwinds, Yō in her shining armor started the direct confrontation with [Two Wings].

Part 7

The route that Izayoi and Asuka had chosen to transverse the sea of trees did not wind around too much. Though the inlet was small at first, it soon widen enough to allow a small boat to travel with ease.

Besides the occasional fallen or drifting log, this could be called a smooth road.

Just that---these parts of the river was claimed territorial waters for some Eudemons.

"Oujo-sama, bottom right! It's coming!"

"I know!"

Pulling her reins at the last moment, she managed to shy away from the underwater attack.

What emerged to the surface of the river was a Eudemon similar to a Hippocamp, looking like a horse spirit---a Kelpie.

More of vengeful spirits than faeries, they were a collection of spirits that had passed on in the forest. Once caught in their grasp, there would be no escaping a watery death.

Using stones to confront the enemy, Izayoi soon realize that the stones were passing through the spirit albeit disrupting it's ethereal form for just a short while before it reformed. If it were to be punched by his fists, it might have been a different matter altogether. But according to the rules, support members are not allowed to be in the river. Though there was also the method of leaping to attack, he didn't want to risk it by trying.

"Horrid! Let's just maintain the situation for now! Oujo-sama, just continue to move forth!"

"Got it! Zipopo-san, please give it your best!"

Waving her whip to urge the Hippocamp, it gave off a loud neigh as it started to gallop on the water surface with much renewed vigor. And though she managed to leave some of those Kelpies behind, the increased speed cause her to be slower in reacting to the frontal attack.

"Wu! Horrid! Burn to ashes!"

Lifting her fire jewel inlaid gauntlet, Asuka touched the Kelpie that lunged at her. Even though the Kelpie was made out of water held together by the spirits, the Kelpie was vaporized instantly as though water was never a counter to fire.

The vapor obstructed her vision but Asuka continued to push forward for her instincts told her that it was necessary to obtain victory.

Watching the Hippocamp travel twice its original speed under Asuka's command, Izayoi was deeply impressed.

(Oo? …Looks like she really can strengthen Gifts and Eudemons too.)

Asuka had the power to bring out the maximum potential of Gifts and increase their spiritual level.

Due to the lack of physical strength on her part, it hampered her from using her powers with ease, but……

(If this flaw could be overcome, Oujo-sama might even be quite useful in the future right?)

The FireStarter Gift on Asuka was one that needed the prerequisite, of coming into contact with the intended object, to be fulfilled. And this was due to the fact that the Gift was a weaker type. In other words, if equipped with a Gift with a stronger firepower, it might even be possible for her to lay this whole forest to ash.

"…I'll need to have nice discussion with Jack about this."

"Discuss about?"

"Nothing, just a little private matters----Oh, we have made it through!"

After crossing the sea of trees, the two of them could faintly hear the sound of the waterfall that was gushing down the edge of the cliff.

The close proximity to the waterfall caused mist to cling to the air and visibility was very much reduced.

Though Kuro Usagi had said that the checkpoint was at the top of the mountain, the Hippocamp couldn't possibly hike up this kind of waterfall.

"This waterfall…. Sure does come from quite some height…"

"Yep, I guess if we go around it, we will find the way to get to the top right?"

"Yep…" Izayoi answered simply.

If this was only a common waterfall and river, then where did that sense of unease come from……perhaps it is just my imagination. Izayoi shook his head to clear the doubts as he began to climb the mountain.

Part 8

---Forest of Al Pisano, Chosen Route of [Two Wings]

"Take the chance! Let's attack together!"

If one counted, this would have been the third aerial battle. Yō was surrounded from all sides but this was all part of her plan. She released the condensed glittery whirlwinds from her cupped hands to her surroundings and met their attacks with her own.

The violent turbulences of the raging winds lifted Griffith's subordinates high into the sky before dropping them down below.

Of the [Two Wings] participants, only one rider and Griffith were left standing and even Griffith had some minor scratches while breathing so heavily his shoulders shook.

On the contrary, Yō wasn't panting and was breathing quite calmly. From the start of her battle, Yō's focus had only been to force the riders to fall into the river and help contribute to the victory of her Community.

"Damn you……Just a mere lowly monkey like you cause my [Two Wings] comrades…"

Griffith seemed like he was giving a moan as he said that.

Yō couldn't believe her own strength as well.

(……Things are really looking up for me. And it wasn't too long ago that I couldn't do a thing.)

Enhancing her physical strength after battling with the Titans, receiving the Gift of Pegasus and increasing the number of Gryphon air turbulences she can control by a few folds. Even for her flight that used to be full of unnecessary movements and was much of a struggle in the past had become second nature to her due to her mastery of the force fields.

(The current me…. May even be able to challenge other high level Games.)

Yō also befriended some other types of Eudemons privately.

If all the connections were transformed into equipment, how much stronger would her battle strength be?

Just how many possibilities did her father's creation [Genome Tree] hold?

The mere thought of those caused Yō's heart to race.

(But, I should be focusing more on this current game I'm currently participating in than anything else.)

Yō's focus returned to Griffith who was before her and she used her sharp gaze to stare at him, not wanting to let any movement or words escape from her sight.

Gry who lost his wings in Izayoi's stead.

Sala who broke off her dragon horn for Asuka.

She definitely couldn't forgive Griffith who had ridiculed them.

(It shouldn't be a problem anymore since I've delayed them for this long.)

She had already fulfilled her duty to her Community.

And it was time for her to fulfill her duty as a friend of theirs.

"It's almost time to end this…"

Allowing her Genome Tree to transform back into a necklace, she landed on the ground.

Griffith was shocked to see her armor unequipped without as much as a "By your leave" but he quickly responded with a question:

"What's this, you stupid girl!"

"Let's decide our battle with the next blow. To clear the debt of the humiliation you caused, I will accept your strongest punch directly."

"?"

Griffith could not understand those words as he looked at her with eyes full of doubt and confusion.

Determination shone brighter in Yō's gaze as she stressed on the words of her proclamation:

"You seem to be very confident in your bloodline. I will make sure that your bloodlines of the cross between a Gryphon and a Longma that you hold pride for---IS COMPLETELY TORN DOWN AND SMASH YOUR ARROGANCE TO BITS!"

To make Griffith pay for the crimes of his humiliating insults, Yō decided that she would shatter the root of that arrogance.

"……Don't you start getting over your head…you WINGLESS FEMALE MONKEY!"

The continuous torrent of humiliating taunts finally broke his last straw and his pent up anger fully erupted.

Draconic scales that were symbolic to Longmas started to appear on his body, forming a protective armor around his whole body. Griffith even forgo the appearance of the gryphon that he has admired all these time and adopted his skull to that of a dragon's head.

Particles of light were given out from Griffith's whole body and a pair of majestic dragon horns and wings had also grown out of his body.

Yō watched the dramatic changes without a change in her expression---

(….Eh? Oops, did I say too much?)

But she was getting a bit jittery inside. She didn't expect him to grow a pair of dragon horns when angry.

The fully enraged Griffith had transformed into a *DracoGriff* and a Eudemon who had lost all sense of reason as it charged forward.

"---

GYRUAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Colliding with an explosion. And it was no normal sound for an explosion.

It was the rapid expansion of air rushing out in all directions faster than the speed of sound due to the great amount of friction heating them up---In other words, a sonic boom of thunder.

Griffith's body had become one with the lightning and was charging with a speed that would surely exceed that of a Gryphon by a few folds.

(Just with a Pegasus's Gift wouldn't do much good! And if so, I will just have to use a stronger type of Eudemon of a higher level---!)

---Holding the Genome Tree in her hand, Yō used her imagination to envision a new Eudemon while taking Griffith's form into account and allowing the genes to form and restructure themselves into a whole new set of equipment.

The genealogical tree centered on the concept of the five elements, and held the genetic information of 360 beast lords. Using a Kirin's lone horn as the blueprint to craft the weapon---It was a long lance that was twice as long as Yō was tall.

"---
GYRUAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Griffith who had transformed into a *DracoGriff* collided with the horned lance with his own horns and continued to charge forward. And the lance firmly gripped within Yō's hands were also of the same elemental attributes, being able to emit flashes of lightning from its dragonic horn.

It was the symbol of the Kirin, lord of all Eudemons and beasts.

(No problem, I should be able to block this one!)

As the dragonic horns collided with each other, a strong shockwave rocked the entire sea of trees as it spread outwards.

The force of the charge had been completely negated and it was now a battle of physical strength.

The lightning and heat of Griffith's charge set the trees along the river bank ablaze and the collision caused the earth to heave up and the area Yō stood became a depression in the ground. Slowly but surely, Yō was able to push back the other with the strength of the Titans.

Even though Griffith in his *DracoGriff* form had lost most of his sense of reasoning, it would seem that he still retained just enough to realize the unfavorable condition that he was in.

Using his front claws to push himself, Griffith lifted Yō and her lance into the air with the crook of his horns before charging once more at the opening he saw in Yō's defenses, trying to run her through with his horns.

"---
GYRUAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

"Watch this---!"

Yō did not resist the recoil from the dragon horns' thrust but used it in a circular motion to swing her lance. Borrowing strength from the recoil from the *DracoGriff* and adding it to the Titan's strength, she used the centrifugal force to whack Griffith squarely on his back.

The unexpected counterattack caused the *DracoGriff* to spasm and utter a loud cry.

"GYa……"

The scale mail of the *DracoGriff*'s back was destroyed but the lance was a smooth surface and did not leave any gashes, so he should be fine. The unconscious Griffith continued to twitch before ceasing all movements.

"Gr…Griffith-sama…"

The rider of [Two Wings] that could only watch the battle from a distance gave a moan.

Eek! Yō shifted her gaze towards him and he jumped into the river with a shriek to escape.

"…Hu."

Yō then confirmed the presences around her.

It would seem that there were only those [Two Wings] Support Group members that were lying on the ground.

With that, Kasukabe Yō scanned the surroundings one more time before raising her right hand,

"Victory…."

to form a V with her fingers, announcing her victory to the faraway audiences.

Part 9

---[Hippocamp Riders] Underground City Audience stands.

Having seen the battle between Kasukabe Yō and Griffith, the spirits of the audience were ablaze once more.

"Griffith-sama can actually grow out his dragonic horns! That's really impressive!"

"But for his opponent to beat him, that [No Name] sure isn't just a simple group!"

"That's for sure! That lady was the strong one who managed to deplete [Six Scars]' food storage!"

The intense battle caused the audience stands to be abuzz with comments.

Facing off with strong opponents and deploying all the various strategies to do battle was the essence of Gift Games. To be able to see this which was similar to a Battle Royale, it would be questionable if one could find something that was more entertaining than this life.

Shiroyasha patted the head of the little demon that was sitting on her knees—[Laplace Little demon] while gazing at the played out scene with a big smile on her face.

"Hehe, bringing you guys here is definitely a good choice, Lapleasy."

"It's an honor to receive your praise."

A little demon wearing a purple one piece dress replied.

Unlike the other four, this one wore a different colored dress that showed her position as a commander. Her abilities lay in the receiving of information relayed

from the other four and being able to project it out on the scene like what was seen on the stage now.

To put it in layman terms, it was similar to the antenna of a television. Currently on the screen on the cliff surface, Kasukabe Yō could be seen waving to the audience stands while announcing her triumph.

"This is really unexpected. To think that she can easily knock out Griffith when his powers were awaken. It has only been two months and she has progressed this far…What in the world is the gift [Genome Tree], Lapleasy?"

The little demon, who was called by her nickname given by Shiroyasha, tilted her small head to one side before replying truthfully:

"I'm very sorry. Even after searching through my mother's memories, I'm still unable to find the exact match for that Gift."

"Nn, is it so?"

"…But there should be a similar item in the past and if given time to search, we might be able to deduce its background."

"Sorry to trouble you about it but could you come and report to me when you can find some free time?.....Right, do you want something to eat?"

"Then, a spotted pear please."

KachaKacha Receiving a spotted pear as big as herself, she bit into the crunchy pear noisily.

At the same moment, Kuro Usagi the commentator for the live broadcast loudly announced:

"The first participant to reach the checkpoint is---Kudou Asuka of [No Name]! There's no other contestants appearing as of yet! Can she keep up the advantage of taking the lead and reach the endpoint first?!"

Kuro Usagi's ears were waving around in joy as she broadcasted the latest updates for the Game.

Though she still hadn't notice---

A contestant that appeared a beat later… was traveling at an unusual speed and rapidly closing the distance between them.

Part 10

---Izayoi's premonition was definitely right on spot.

The wind that blew from the top of the mountain stung in his nostrils while leaving his skin moist and gritty as it blew pass them. The clear waters that seem to spring from the melting pot of life was very refreshing and gave off a nostalgic feel to the surroundings.

The azure blue waterline extended all the way to the horizon.

What stood before them after scaling the mountain was---a vast expanse of water stretching to the horizons.

"Ha…Haha! It really is the world of Little Garden! I had guessed that there was a sea nearby but I didn't expect ……The sea to be on the Mountain!" Izayoi gesticulated from the beach with his arms as he shouted at the azure blue sea before him.

---Izayoi had observed the fishes that rested in the shallows of Tritonis Waterfall before and though there were slight changes in appearance, they were actually a type of Jack Mackerel that were supposed to inhabit the seas. Out of curiosity, Izayoi had gone to investigate the water quality and found that it had a similar composition as that of seawater.

Due to that previous reference, Izayoi had thought that it might have been the incursion of sea water somewhere upstream but never did he expect to see the origin to be from the big sea on top of the mountain.

[In other words, the closer it is to the upper echelons of Little Garden, the higher the altitude? If it is water that I see all along the horizon, would that mean that part of the region is completely submerged under the sea?]

"Izayoi-san! There's a tree growing out of the surface of the sea! It should be that tree right?"

Izayoi who was deep in thought was pulled back to reality by Asuka's shout.

A jumble of trees of different heights were growing along the beach and the sea surface where Asuka was pointing to. The fruits on the tree were red and ripe and seemed more delicious in the way they looked in the sunlight.

"Oooh…. Looks good. It would seem that this was worth the anticipation."

The sweet fragrance of the fruits were even a match for the sea breeze as Izayoi climbed the tree happily to pluck a fruit. After the both of them place the fruit into a little bag, they turned their backs on the horizon that stretched behind them.

"Actually, I still want to play here for a while longer…"

"KayKay, Let's come another time. Now let's prioritize on the game."

Izayoi reluctantly ran along the beach after getting a rare chiding from Asuka.

Having travelled upstream for the journey to the checkpoint, the return journey to [Underwood] was very much easier with the flow of the river in their favor. Griffith of [Two Wings] had already retired from the game and the other strong---

"---Izayoi-san! She's here!"

Tucking away her relaxed mood, Asuka prepared for battle. Faceless was rapidly closing in from a different route that she chose to come up from and the water frothed violently under the gallop.

Seeing Asuka and Izayoi as she came to the top of the mountain, Faceless's mouth twitched up at the corners.

"……It seems that only you guys managed to reach the checkpoint."

Summoning her favorite whip sword from her Gift Card, she swiped a fruit off the tree in a moment and removed the lead that [No Name] had on her instantly.

"Izayoi-san, see? This is all your fault for only caring about sightseeing!"

"Nn. It's my bad this time, sorry."

Izayoi offered a sincere apology since it was his negligence. No matter how you looked at it, the responsibility for the loss of much precious time was Izayoi and Izayoi's alone. Easily feeling nostalgic and admiring an amazing scenery might be his biggest weakness.

Unlocking a mechanism in her whip sword at the hilt, Faceless turned her sword to face Asuka while holding her reins tightly while fierce determination seemed to roll off that expressionless masked rider. The atmosphere of the situation became very testy in a short while.

Both sides were waiting for the opportune timing.

If they weren't alert enough, Faceless would be toppled over or Asuka may be stripped naked.

"Eh?"

At this moment, there was a huge change in the seaside.

Land and sea began to rock rhythmically and the sea breezes had become violent gusts that battered against them. Assuming that it was a tsunami caused by an earthquake, Asuka and Izayoi had heightened their senses for an emergency. But it was soon proved wrong to them.

Only Faceless had guessed correctly the first time and her eyes grew wide at the approaching threat.

"…It can't be… That guy who's often laughed at as the 'floating withered log', actually makes his move for such a child's play?!"

The tone of surprise and disbelief was totally unlike the usual her.

The source of the tremor was from the foot of the waterfall and a following a loud explosion, the person and his steed appeared like a tephra thrown into the air by a volcano, he stood on top of a pillar of water that shot up into the sky. Realizing that the reversal of water flow was due to this loud explosion of water, they were seriously shaken by the stunt shown to them.

"Oops, this is quite a problem! I've only just woken up due to oversleeping past the event time! And even asking The Lord of White Night to add me to the list of participants. I guess I've troubled her again."

Though it was still the same fake Kansai slang that he always use, the feeling that he exudes from his presence was less friendly than the other night. The last contestant that appeared out of nowhere---Saurian Demon King swept his wet hair soaked by water spray back as he calmly regarded the group before him.

"It's fortunate that you guys are taking your time here that I managed to catch up so easily---I guess it shouldn't be too difficult for me to obtain the victory like this."

Saurian Demon King declared in a domineering and confident voice.

The race finally arrived at the second half as the strongest and last contestant took the stage in [Hippocamp Riders].

Chapter 8

Part 1

Ding Ling---the clear sound of bells hung lightly in the air.

Facing her back to the moon, Shiroyasha smiled as she dropped the line:

"If you want……I can also let you meet [Great Sage Equalling Heavens]."

"…what did you say?"

"Just that there's two conditions:

1. Help Sala Doltrake become the [Floor Master].

2. Win in the Game [Hippocamp Riders]

If you agree to the above two conditions, I will help you summon Wu Kong to Little Garden."

Shiroyasha threw back her long silver hair as she smiled, added with the silver hair that was giving off its own softly glowing sun-rays, it helped to multiply the sense of sacredness emitted from her. She may be trying to lure Kouryuu with a bait but that did not mean that she was any more feminine in presence as she continued to hold that majestic presence that would never be found on any normal girl.

"Only Sun Wu Kong can help to make the hands of your clock tick once more. The current you…that others coined as having a look similar to a 'floating withered log', would cause much pain to those who have known you for a long time."

"……"

"If you don't believe me, then forget it. Miss this opportunity and you will just have to wait for the next one after a few hundred or even thousand years. I would advise you to accept it now."

Shiroyasha flicked open her paper fan and used it to cover her mouth. Was she smiling or sniggering? Kouryuu looked at her doubtfully as he pondered over her offer.

After a while of staring at each other, Kouryuu was the first to give up.

"……Hng! After all it isn't anyone else but Lord of White Night-sama who's using such a honey trap on me. Even if I get tricked, it would still be considered as a sort of amusement……But is it really all right to do this? Once I enter the stage, the game will be in a mess."

"Hm. I really wonder about that. I actually think that the possibility of you winning is much smaller."

"---What?" Kouryuu widened his eye as he stared at Shiroyasha in a rage. The immediate revival of the Demon King's domineering sprit brought much joy to Shiroyasha and she laughed heartily while disappearing into the Moonlight.

Part 2

---Beach of SeaTree Cluster.

On the beach where the sea wind continued to blast at them, four people were eyeing their opponents warily.

Izayoi had shifted much of his attention to Saurian Demon King who was smiling in a relaxed manner. That total confidence in his smile was like a poisonous snake without a trace of the sheepskin disguise that he once had. Izayoi's instincts told him that if he acted rashly, a bite from that snake would instantly put him to eternal sleep.

(…What a surprise. When compared to the him of yesterday, it's as though he's a totally different person.)

Though he might want to have a go at Saurian Demon King at least once, he did not expect the day to come so soon. If it were another game, he would have gone on ahead to confront him directly by now, with or without plans.

For Izayoi, helping Sala was just a convenient task that was in line with his plans since he wanted the Gift that Shiroyasha would be giving as a prize no matter what. Hence, he would never let that goal go to waste.

(……Though I may think that way, I guess staring at each other isn't much of a plan either.)

Izayoi steeled his resolution as he moved to stand in front of Asuka as he whispered:

"Ojou-sama, this guy still needs to get the fruit. I will be here to delay him as much as I can. Just take the chance now to run back as fast as you can."

"…O-Okay. Got. It."

Asuka answered reluctantly as her emotions were in a jumble.

And that was only normal. Izayoi's words was the same as calling her to leave the most dangerous place once more. Though Asuka knew that it was a reasonable request since the rider could not afford to fall off their steeds, she couldn't help but feel a little disappointed.

Perhaps he could guess her deepest thoughts, Izayoi used a stern tone to lecture Asuka:

"Hey. You better straighten up your thoughts. Oujo-sama. You still have to deal with that Rider-sama alone."

Asuka immediately lifted her head and took a deep breath. Just a little thinking would have told her that was an obvious result.

If Izayoi confronted Saurian Demon King, the balance on the field will immediately be broken. Her opponent will never be that lenient to let go of the opportunity. Asuka would immediately taste defeat if she let up her wariness for even a moment.

"Oujo-sama, I will entrust it to you. That rider-sama is undoubtedly the strongest opponent you have ever faced thus far. For things to progress to this stage, even I will not be able to guess how things would go on from here. Oujo-sama's choice will be one that decides the fate of the result. You should recognize that fact for yourself more than others."

To be conscious about oneself and take on the responsibility---that was what Izayoi meant.

This was the first time ever that he had entrusted Asuka with a task.

"……Got it. Izayoi-san, do your best too."

Tightening her grip on the reins, Asuka readjusted her position on the saddle to prepare for departure at a short notice.

Izayoi also set his heart and prepared for a jump.

However at this moment, Kouryuu broke them off.

"I'm sorry to say this when you two were taking your time to discuss. But the time you had wasted was far too long and it allowed me to make my preparations."

"What?"

That sudden speech caused Izayoi to hit an obstacle in his planning. It may have been a type of speech to throw the opponent off but the timing was too perfect.

Kouryuu raised his right hand and immediately an explosive sound that was of a bigger magnitude than before rumbled towards them.

And the next moment, they would soon come to realize that the name ----[Great Sage who Devastate Seas] isn't just in name only.

"Could that be… a tsunami!?"

"Too high! No, this is bad! Run now, Ojou-sama! If this continues, the game would surely end!"

Izayoi quickly shouted as he remembered the game rules.

In the section of Forbidden Actions, it's said that any contestant that fell into the water would be seen as falling from their steeds and would be disqualified. And even if it were the sea, falling in would still be a disqualification.

Faceless seemed to have realized this bleak situation and was galloping towards the water fall.

Leaning her head against her favorite steed, she asked: "… Can you jump?"

Her steed only gave a short neigh in reply and whinnied as it leapt off the waterfall, descending rapidly from a height of hundred meters.

"Goodness gracious……even if I survive that, falling into the water in the plunge pool would still be an end game."

"But there's no other way already! Ojou-sama should also run towards the waterfall!"

Don't ask for the impossible! That was what Asuka would have liked to say but her pride would not allow her to say it.

Kudou Asuka's physical body was no different from a normal person. Surely this height would be more than enough to claim her life.

Yet it would be spelling out the word surrender if she said it. Gift games have never been normal games for normal people from the start. Those who couldn't believe in winning would never win as well. That was what Asuka had also learnt and understood well.

Moreover---This was the first time that Izayoi had entrusted her with a battle.

If she ran away now, she would never be able to ask for equality nor could she expect Izayoi entrust her with future tasks to handle.

"…..Wu~…ahhhhhh! This is infuriating! If I don't make it, remember to search for my remains!"

"Okay! Leave it to me!"

Waving her whip, she sped off on her steed.

The water spray kicked up by the gallop of the Hippocamp caused a wall of water to be churned up on both sides, seemingly like a miniature waterfall that dispersed soon after their passing. Such was the need to escape that he didn't really care about his control of the water tension and water pressure anymore since the speed he was going at forbid such nuances in technique.

Asuka turned back to take a look at the Tsunami behind her that was catching up while screaming in her heart in self-despair:

(Anything would be fine now! Baka----!)

When they leapt from the edge of the waterfall, they were airborne and momentarily hung in mid-air before their free fall began.

Asuka started her mental preparations for her death.

Part 3

---Underground City. [Hippocamp Riders] Audience Stands.

Everyone held their breaths as they watched the scene of the tsunami moving towards the Sea Tree cluster with much intensity in their eyes. All the cheers for Saurian Demon King's entrance had dissipated.

When Faceless had leapt from the waterfall, someone yelled:

"Look! She plans to escape by jumping the waterfall!"

"How can that be! That's too rash a move!"

"That's just suicide!"

Groans could be heard from the crowd of audience. Though those who knew of her strength would know that she will not die, they too glued their eyes to the screen while worrying if it would spell the end of her game.

Shiroyasha had also leaned forward, focusing intently to see Faceless's choice of action.

(Come on, show us what you will do now, favored one of [Queen Halloween].)

Would it be the gift of flight? Or water control? Everyone's eyes were glued to the screen watching and waiting for her move to break the pinch and create a miracle.

Having leapt from the waterfall's edge, Faceless took a deep breath---

"…Huuu."

before taking out two spears while in freefall.

Even after the jump, she had not shown any sign of wanting to use other Gifts. The masked rider allowed herself to fall with the aid of gravity and at the moment before hitting the water surface----She spun both spears in each hand and SMASHED THEM DOWNWARDS.

"……Eh?"

There were gasps of surprise coming from the crowd and it was more than sporadic but almost a choir of gasps. Those who understood what she just did were too stunned for words.

Kuro Usagi was also one of those who was stumped for a moment as she watched the turn of events. However, she managed to recover her wits and report on the situation.

"What….What a superb display of spear wielding skills! The moment that masked rider Faceless swung her spears down just seconds before she landed on the water….The force of the impact was dispersed by that downward force of her swing and the resultant equal and opposite force pushes them up a little."

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOoooooooooooooh!

Upon hearing Kuro Usagi's explanation, the audience broke into applause and cheers!

None of them could have expected that she would be able to escape that situation without the use of Gifts.

This was no simple feat that can be executed by wielding spears without high level technique involved. Exerting too much strength would cause the water surface to part while the use of too little strength would be unable to negate the impact.

Faceless's execution of a stunt that didn't allow any margin for failure caused the audience to be awestruck.

Though Kuro Usagi was also in awe for having witnessed that moment, she was also worried about Asuka's safety.

(Asuka-san……Please don't push yourself too much……)

There was the kind of courage needed to surrender but this would not be an option for Asuka.

Holding her hands close to her heart, Kuro Usagi prayed for Asuka's safety.

Part 4

(Wa-------!)

This was the second time that Asuka had experienced freefall.

First was when she was summon to Little Garden.

And the second one was this very moment.

It should take around 5 seconds before she hits the water surface. To be able to calmly use that time to think was all thanks to her previous experience.

(My left gauntlet…… holds the almost destroyed [Hand of Amber].)

It was a milky white amber fragment that had a seed of the water tree embedded in it.

And though it already had some serious cracks in it, Asuka believed that it was still useable for a few more times. Seeing how the situation was, Asuka knew that this was the time to use it to break her out of this pinch.

(If I only controlled the water flow, there would be no point to that since the Hippocamp will still hit the water surface……

There was only one chance in this situation. What can I do? What to do?)

Asuka racked her brains till its brain juices were almost squeezed dry when she finally came upon the last resort.

(Hippocampus have the Gift to control water flow, water pressure and water surface tension to run on its surface. Why shouldn't I use my own power to strengthen that Gift to the maximum?!)

Asuka knew no theory or mechanics behind it.

Nor did she have time to construct such intricacies.

Asuka just knew about her power and by using it, she projected the image in mind over the waters below.

Part 5

The Audience Stands were silent when watching the skillful maneuver executed by Faceless. That was due to the awe they had for the strong contestant.

Similarly, when the screens showed Asuka being saved, the audience were in a state of silence.

---But this time, it wasn't due to awe.

It's just that their jaws were hanging loose as they stared at the screen in a daze. Even Kuro Usagi couldn't make any sense about what actually happened and didn't know how to explain.

As the questions started to spread and grow, Shiroyasha at the Projection location spoke up in a low and voice as she contemplated:

"……bounced up."

"Yes?"

"Vertically bounced up… by the water surface."

---That was precisely what happened. It was as though the water was rejecting Asuka and her steed such that they were bounced on it gently.

A similar expression would be a watery trampoline. By raising the water surface tension to the maximum, controlling the water pressure to make it have a soft texture, she managed to get them both safely at the bottom of the waterfall as they….bounced on the water.

The scene had quite a humorous element to it and it caused some people to start laughing. But Shiroyasha knew just how high level a technique a stunt like that called for and hence went into contemplation:

"Though it looked quite unbelievable at that point in time… but what that girl just did was a high level control of water flow that I've not seen an equal for years. My goodness. That was really an astounding display of skill!"

Flicking her fan open with a *Pak!*, Shiroyasha praised Asuka.

Having heard her explanation, the mood of the crowd heated up again and was filled with applause and cheers.

Yet just a second after---the tsunami that came over the mountain top inundated the forest below.

Part 6

---Beach of Sea Tree cluster.

After Asuka and Faceless leapt from the waterfall, Izayoi had also started swinging his fists to defend himself. There was no fanciful tricks from him but merely pulling his punches on the wave one after another and opening a huge hole in it.

"Stop bumbling around with me!"

The magnitude of the Tsunami decreased with the swinging of his fists, while the pressure of Izayoi's punches denied any water spray that was caused by the previous punch to come near him.

It was a punch that could split the seas and shattering mountains or land itself. Using his waist as the fulcrum to add centrifugal force to his punches, he successfully reduced the tsunami's magnitude by half.

Licking off the seawater on his finger and ascertaining its salinity, Izayoi turned his head to look at Kouryuu.

"Sorry about that. It's just that I don't feel like getting wet again today."

"What do you mean? It sounds like you always get drenched by water."

"Nn. On average, it's once per month that I will be wet through to the toes."

Though Izayoi was drenched from the lower abdominal and below, he continued to lift his chest proudly while replying indifferently. And that seemed to prove his words right regarding his misfortune with water.

Perhaps Izayoi looked ridiculous in that state for Kouryuu burst into a hearty laugh.

The man who wasn't a slightest bit affected by the tsunami stepped down from his Hippocamp.

"I get it now. The requirement for disqualification requires the full body to be drenched and or fall from the steed? I guess it's my miscalculation. Seeing how the rules are so relaxed, those two girls should be alright."

"Of course they are fine. Though Oujo-sama is like a flower grown in a greenhouse, I can assure you that she has quite some determination in her."

Izayoi laughed heartily.

Kouryuu smiled wryly in return:

"Looks like I should quickly be done with this side before hurrying back. Would you be so kind as to let me pluck one of those fruits behind you?"

"What nonsense are you sprouting? If I let you pluck one of those fruits, you would rush all the way back to the finish line with that top speed."

To be able to catch up with Izayoi and the others when traveling upstream, there would be no way for Kouryuu to be unable to pass Asuka and the others within a blink of the eye if he got his hands on a fruit.

Izayoi had to delay this guy here no matter what it took.

"Since you dismounted, then I assume that you are willing to play with me right, Saurian Demon King-sama?"

"Of course. If the rumors of you having defeated the strongest species is true, just with me alone shouldn't be much of a match for you right?"

Kouryuu smiled his suspicious smile once again while shrugging his shoulders in a relaxed manner.

However, he was not in a hurry to grab the fruit which meant that he was quite calm and confident with himself. Otherwise, he could have ignored Izayoi and gone straight for the trees.

(……Ha! This seems interesting!)

Izayoi happily got into his battle stance. But Kouryuu did not show any move to use the scimitar that hung at his waist which could mean that he welcomed the fist fight with Izayoi.

It was a long time since his last fist fight in the battle with Weser and Izayoi could barely contain his excitement.

"Don't you regret this, Saurian Demon King----!"

Kicking off from the ground, he shot straight forward.

The resistance of the seawater caused his speed to be slowed but he continued to close the distance between him and Kouryuu at a speed that far exceeded the normal human capability. If left to a normal person, they wouldn't be able to catch his movements with their sight.

Izayoi who was fast enough to leave after-images swung his fist that could shatter mountains and open paths in the sea---



"…What?!"

only to have Saurian Demon King blocking it with a hand.

"Hey lad, when you face a much stronger opponent, wouldn't it be a bad idea to use such a straightforward tactic?"

Saurian Demon King grabbed Izayoi's fist tightly while his smile disappeared.

A monstrous amount of pressure came down on Izayoi, causing his senses to tell him to flee.

(This….This guy……)

"Though I may say so, the fist that you let fly was quite filled with raw talent. Just that it's quite a pity---Nah, I will just ditch that thought. Just take this as a free lesson. I cannot kill you here so don't die on me just yet……"

Saurian Demon King lowered his stance and widened his eye as he used a palm to strike at Izayoi's centre while twisting it to give a spin to it. The accumulation of experience over the span of many a thousand winters that developed such a striking method caused Izayoi to feel an unprecedented amount of pain stabbing at his internal organs.

(Pu…….)

Though Izayoi felt as if his blood was flowing in reverse and the broken blood vessels caused him to taste blood in his mouth, he continued to clench his teeth to suppress the pain…

And twisted his body to lash out at Saurian Demon King with his leg.

"What….!"

The unexpected counterattack caused Saurian Demon King to gasp in surprise.

Having planned to take out the opponent with one strike, who would have expected that he not only survived the strike but was still able to give a counter attack. That in itself was a big surprise for Saurian Demon King.

As both of them were sent flying backwards, they both skipped across the surface of the sea before landing quite a distance away from each other.

The first to get back up on his feet was Saurian Demon King.

(That….That was really shocking. To think that he was able to withstand that strike and return a counter at me.)

Despite the fact that Saurian Demon King wasn't the strongest species, it was no joke that his spiritual power exceeded that of normal divine beings.

Having accumulated the accomplishment of meditating under the sea and in the mountains for thousands of years respectively, a snake could also achieve the peak of monasticism and transform into the rare species of dragon: [Dragon Deity].

However, Saurian Demon King had sped up this process by half when he had meditated upon a Deep Sea Submarine Volcano for a thousand years. Having obtained the accomplishment in the inhabitable heat and highly viscous pillow lava fields in the sea, he now had a power on par with Gaia and a sea god combined.

And that strike was one that condensed the essence of the Earth and the sea which shouldn't be able to be withstood by a human.

"Lad….What in the world is your body constructed from?"

"That's my line you moron!"

Izayoi used the back of his hand to wipe off the trickle of blood from his mouth as he finally got to his feet after some trouble.

Though Saurian Demon King had expressed his surprise in a relaxed manner, he definitely received Izayoi's kick at full power. Nevertheless, he still got back up with ease.

To date, Izayoi had battled with two Divine class spirits and they were not without scratches. It was just that they were able to use their exceptional regenerative powers to nullify the effects of Izayoi's attacks.

However it was obvious with this Demon King…that Izayoi's attack was practically useless.

Though it was a strike that could rock a planet to the core, an unprecedented result had appeared.

(Tch! Has it finally appeared…?)

Izayoi panted heavily as he accepted the situation before him.

He had already predicted this day where he would meet an opponent that would cause him to be in a pinch.

A demon lord that had a body tougher than his own finally stood in front of him.

(Ha…As expected of the world of Little Garden. It wouldn't have been interesting otherwise…!)

Not wasting any strength on little tricks, rushing headlong to square off with his strongest opponent.

As a look of pure delight spread across Izayoi's face, his heated blood rushed to his brain which kicked into overdrive to allow him to grasp faster combat assessments and reactions.

Throwing aside the original plan to guard the fruits, he now focused on the plan to let his steam out in the game: To defeat the guy before him.

Though he had thought up of many ways to break through those defenses…he still fell back on the first plan of trying the same tactic as he made a direct attack.

Part 7

A second after surviving the fall to the plunge pool of the waterfall, Asuka already started to shout with all her might for they still weren't clear of the danger that was fast approaching:

"Quickly! Gallop Now!"

As though saying "I will run even if you didn't tell me that!" the Hippocamp had neighed as it rushed forward.

Choosing the same route back would be too dangerous. She was alone to fend for herself and she couldn't afford to be delayed by the Kelpies.

(Which route did Faceless choose…Argh! Blast it! I don't even have time to ponder!)

Though the tsunami was much weaker due to Izayoi pulling his punches on it, there was no mistaking that it would all be over if the wave came over them. The wave that bulldozed its way through the forest inundated the sea of trees without a shred of mercy.

Frantically urging her Hippocamp while waving her whip, Asuka finally spotted the figure of Faceless ahead.

(Found her…!)

The steed of Faceless was undoubtedly of a famous breed but the Hippocamp that was strengthened by Asuka's powers was not to be underestimated. Judging it to be a good opportunity, Asuka was about to urge her steed to step up its speed---

The tip of the Serpens Scorpio Sword blade narrowly missed the tip of her nose and she was forced to slow.

(……Is that a warning for me?)

The distance between them was roughly twenty meters. The attack radius of that whip sword roughly covered the width between both river banks.

(The rules forbid killing of opponents. I should be able to get pass if I give it my all….I think…so…)

---As long as Faceless doesn't have any other cards up her sleeve. However, the price would be Asuka riding into [Underwood] fully nude.

(…Uwu….)

Just the thought of it caused Asuka's face and ears to go red. Suffering that kind of humiliation even if she won made death more preferable. However, Asuka didn't have any other choice currently.

…I can't win without stripping? This painful thought caused her to feel a twinge in her heart.

Just when Asuka swallowed nervously and steeled her resolve to rush forth---

Kasukabe Yō descended from the sky in her shining winds.

"Asuka! Are you all right?"

"Ka...Kasukabe-san! Where have you been just now?"

"Sorry, I was waiting for you guys further downstream after defeating Griffith."

Asuka blinked her eyes in realization. It was only now that she notice how she hadn't seen a shadow of any [Two Wings] participants.

"Oh……Kasukabe-san went to fight alone?"

"Nn. None of the [Two Wings] will be coming. There's only her in front of you."

They held each other's gaze and nodded in unison. There wasn't any hope if she went alone, but if there were two, they might be able to overcome the obstacle.

"Kasukabe-san, could you help me to delay her for a moment while I try to rush pass her?"

"…I will try my best."

The reply that came was hesitant. After all, the opponent was really strong and Yō wasn't able to give her word for that promise. But in this race, there would be many opportunities for Yō to target Faceless.

Take for one, the rule that disqualified a player who gets unseated from the mount and into the water.

Or the rule that restricted her from killing others.

And the most important factor was the fact that riding on a steed caused her to lose her mobility.

"Asking me to engage her in a fight would be impossible……I can only hold out for 10 rounds at most."

"Got it. Then let's do it only at the last part for it's a straight road that we can use to have our final fight!"

Just as they confirmed their strategies, the both of them were suddenly exposed to the sunlight that marked the end of the gloomy forest.

As their vision broadened, [Underwood]'s Great Tree appeared before their eyes.

Part 8

---The first strike was to inflict a fatal wound that aimed for his vitals.

---The second strike was one that was inflicted on the back of the head with the intention to kill him.

---The third strike went way off and was dodged by the opponent.

(……This lad……actually managed to survive my three strikes! And it would seem that he's already able to follow my moves…!)

The surface of the sea churned as Saurian Demon King pulled back to avoid the counterattack.

But what he was interested in was the degree of toughness of Izayoi's body.

A submarine volcano was formed by the hot magma that spewed from a fissure in the Earth's crust and having practiced the spiritual arts there for thousands of years, Saurian Demon King was able to obtain qualities that could be seen in his Soul, Technique and Toughness of his body. Though losing to Roc Demon King of the Garuda lineage in terms of demonic arts, he was on par with Bull Demon King or Handsome Monkey King in terms of Toughness. Amongst all the obtainable spirit levels from practicing spiritual arts, it could be counted as one of the highest.

And since it is the spirit level of a thousand mountains and a thousand seas, the punch of Saurian Demon King was equivalent to the condensation of the breath of a star that built the earth from the sea.

If it were thrown at a normal human, the opponent would have his organs obliterated.

(Could it be that this lad also underwent a thousand years of Spiritual Arts training?)

He immediately dismissed that suspicion of his for he couldn't feel any trace of martial arts or training through years of patience from the punches that the lad threw at him. Those punches didn't have a pattern and was rough in its movement and was evident enough that he had always fought with his raw talent alone till now.

---Saurian Demon King continued to ponder and observe, trying to guess how the enemy before him came into existence.

(The smell of him is undoubtedly human……but his battle style with such excess movements just shows that he has never fought an opponent that was on par with him during his years of development. Could it be that this lad was just summoned over from another world?)

Just by three moves, he deduced the background of his opponent. This level of resourcefulness also made him come in third place in the ranking of the Seven Demon Kings. However, his deduction still had a flaw.

(But if he's human, how would he get this kind of body……No. It's not only for humans. There shouldn't be any living thing in the world that is born with that kind of toughness---)

No. To be accurate, there was just one person. She was born with a power that allowed her to stand against a whole army of demigods, deities and gods alone, which could also be described as the deviation of nature's with her numerous talents.

Saurian Demon King was reminded of the only other who had similar qualities.

(……Similar type of body as Handsome Monkey God Onee-san?)

Hitting upon that possibility, Saurian Demon King's mind blanked out.

However, Izayoi did not miss that opening as he rushed straight up on the Saurian Demon King and landed an uppercut in the centre of Saurian Demon King's chest with the intention of opening a tunnel through it. Saurian Demon King who had dropped his defenses out of carelessness felt a wave of nausea rolling up in him but immediately used his palm to smash into Izayoi's face to make him back off. Having some of Izayoi's blood smeared on his hand, Saurian Demon King decided to smear it on his inner clothes discreetly to keep a sample.

(…… Though I really doubt it, but if it's similar to my Onee-san, the real identity of this lad would be……!)

"Tch! Aren't you quite tough?! What did you train to become like that?"

On the contrary, Izayoi seemed to be very happy as though he found a new partner to play with as he got back up onto his feet.

His face was grazed and blood was seeping into his eye, making his vision seem red at the corners. His ribs having been struck by Kouryuu on the chest had hairline fractures while the impact to the back of his head had left him a little confused.

It was obvious that he was in a very bad state but his heart was freer than before.

(…Hng! Crap! This is really interesting.)

This wasn't a fight anymore. The Demon Lord before him had a much tougher defense than Izayoi. How was he going to try to overcome an opponent that was a level higher than him?

And thinking to that point was what Izayoi felt so excited about, that he couldn't keep it from his facial expressions.

(Nn……The world of Little Garden sure is wide. Even for this kind of fellow, he's only the third in rank of his group…)

He had always felt this kind of feeling when he was up against Percher, the huge dragon and currently the Saurian Demon King before him.

To challenge the impossible……and using one's own flame of life to burn through the obstacles with sheer hard work. That was what Izayoi felt was the most respectable and interesting act in life.

(Though I would win if I can make him fall into the water……but looking at it, it wouldn't be possible for me to do it alone.)

Moreover, to fight [Great Sage who Devastate Seas] on the sea was just what it seemed like: a battle in his own most accustomed territory.

Up till now, he had only used his physical strength. What happens if he really controlled the sea again as his weapon? The thought sent shivers of excitement though Izayoi's body.

"……You seem to be having fun huh? Lad."

He seemed to have unknowingly smiled as well.

Izayoi wiped off the trickle of blood at his mouth before retorting:

"Aren't you the same? Having fun in the moment. And to think that the smile you had at the start was a fake one unlike the one you have on your face now."

"……Really? I look like I'm enjoying myself?" Saurian Demon King mumbled to himself.

The lad was right. The strikes that gave onlookers the goosebumps, the ignition of their minds to enable faster thought processes, analyzing their opponent's next moves and trading blows. The true essence of Gift Games is the gamble where one is required to give his all to have a chance at winning. It was a game that could only be truly enjoyed by people who reached the realm of Gods or Demon Lords.

Needless to say, when two strong people get to trade punches with each other, it would be the greatest delight of their life.

"……"

Just that he, Saurian Demon King had forgotten the previous game that he last participated in.

Fighting with strong opponents, was a thing of the past.

Arriving in Little Garden and proclaiming to be a Demon King as he rushed towards his goal that he had set as high as the Heavens above.

Thirsting for the emotions that he had during those days, Kouryuu had wanted to meet [Great Sage Equalling Heavens] once more… but in the end, his chest was gradually heating up again at this moment.

And this realization caused Saurian Demon King to feel angry with himself.

(…What stupidity. Am I just a man who doesn't have my own principles?)

He had always thought that only the one whom he respected with all his heart would be able to relight this flame within him. But were all those special memories, ambitions and time spent on reminiscing the good old days just a dream that didn't really exist in the first place?

His thirst was so shallow that it could be so easily quenched by a fight?

Saurian Demon King continued to ask himself rhetorical questions which he knew the answer for himself. All it needed was just a little spark to set the withered floating log ablaze?

Just as he was getting depressed by his attitude in life thus far---

Izayoi did a direct confrontation again and mercilessly struck the chest of Saurian Demon King directly at the heart.

"Ku…."

A follow-up came soon after. And the third blow to the chest finally caused Saurian Demon King's body to be jolted. Noting that his opponent was already bending forward, Izayoi launched his fourth consecutive strike towards that body.

But his uppercut hit the air.

Rapidly readjusting his stance after backing away, Saurian Demon King roared in rage:

"Lad! You sure don't let up on your strikes huh?"

"Of course! It's still in the midst of the game and you already start showing that dull expression! Stop belittling others!"

Both of them spun a roundhouse kick at each other at the same time. Izayoi's stance was in favor and it allowed him to repress that of Saurian Demon King's before he started on the follow-up attacks.

Zipping through the sea waves and smashing boulders that were unfortunate to be in the way of their fight, they traded death blows with each other and it soon became an inseparable close-quarter combat.

"Come to think about it, your talent is really impressive! With your level of talent, it wouldn't be surprising if you were recruited over to the higher echelons of Little Garden."

"Ha! I've not stooped that low to betray me and my people! Moreover, I've promised that as long as a Demon Lord appears, I will be the first to stand at the front lines before everyone else!---Yes! That's right! I have the biggest obligation to stand in front of the forefront of the battle lines!"

Hearing Izayoi's shout while they were still fighting, Saurian Demon King was reminded of the shadow of that certain person's back.

---To protect her blood-sworn brothers and sisters--- The back of the one who stepped back onto the battlefield to fight till the end.

"…Aah… Damn it! Showing your strength, courage and resourcefulness to your opponent like that!"

Without a trace of shyness or fear and rebuking harshly when it is for her comrades. That shadow was brighter than anything else to his eye.

Wiping off another trickle of blood from his lips, Izayoi laughed in merriment now.

"If you envy it, then learn from it! Unless you want to tell me that you plan to bring this kind of face to see [Great Sage Equalling Heavens]?!"

Kouryuu was momentarily stumped for words. Seizing the chance of such an obvious opening, Izayoi swung at fist to strike his waist.

Kouryuu almost fell to the bottom of the cliff if not for his quick recovery of his wits that allowed him to stand on the cliff wall some miles down from the fall.

However, his eye continued to stare blankly due to his shock.

"Could…Could it be that you've heard it from Shiroyasha…"

"Stop talking rot. It's just that I can't think up of any other reason that would cause you to recover your domineering spirit for this event……But wow! You really are going to meet [Great Sage Equalling Heavens]? That's so unfair! I would want to tag along too! If not for that guy who got injured……"

Izayoi seemed to be trembling in anger for some unknown reason.

But he soon sorted out his feelings and looked at Saurian Demon King with contempt.

"I will say this in advance. If I had such a useless brother who is thick skinned enough to show up before me, I will be sure to send him flying. And if he happen to be a person who becomes a recluse who hides from the world, I would double the punishment!"

"……"

"So before that, you better start washing your face clean! Right here, Right now before you leave! Let this fight be so heated that it burns all the way to your brains and fry it till most of the synapses are dead. For that is the only way you can explain

to your onee-san the reason for being unable to say much about your life before this!"

Pak! Izayoi punched his fist into his open palm to urge Kouryuu to resume the fight.

His eyes burned with the impatient desire of a lad wanting to test the limits of his power.

"……Nn. Lad. You are quite an interesting one."

And his words couldn't ring truer.

It's been a long time since he parted with his sworn [elder] sister and during that period of time, [Great Sage Equalling Heavens] had also fought for the human realm, raising achievements, making her name known as word spread about her great cause of helping others.

Kouryuu also had his dreams and ambitions in the past.

Raising the flag that had the same name as his title, he had took on the ambition of becoming the great sage who overturns the seas.

But, if he allowed her to see his dejected self who had nothing much to talk about for the many years between……he wouldn't put it pass her to throw him into the Sanzu River……No, that was still quite interesting in a way as well.

It's just that the strong opponent before him would not give up so easily.

"----Let's fight to our hearts content! Saurian Demon King! And it about time for you to get serious."

"Cut the crap. Aren't you holding back your trump card as well? Why aren't you using it?"

Having the similar question shot back in his direction caused Izayoi to feel awkward for a moment and he scratched his head.

"…I'm not trying to hide it on purpose. It's just that if I ever use that move, I won't be able to control it enough to let you survive the hit. Hence in a game that does not place our lives as the bet, it would be very unfair to use that trump card."

"After all, the rules did say to forbid killing." Izayoi added after a pause.

His words and actions made him seem so honest and pure that it seemed quite funny.

(Not abhorring the act of killing each other but not engaging in it when the situation does not call for it?)

To respect a fight and at the same time to respect life. Even Izayoi's soul shone with the same nostalgic radiance as a certain someone. However, by his current level of strength alone…...he would be crushed under foot by a stronger Demon Lord sooner or later.

Just like his sworn [younger] brothers that have long turned to ash.

Assessing and sorting out his thoughts, Kouryuu seemed to come to a decision as he raised his head.

"…Let's just stop here."

"What?"

"Judge! I forfeit my participation! [Great sage who Devastate Seas] hereby request to withdraw from the game!"

His voice travelled to Kuro Usagi's ears and the Participating contract that was signed by Kouryuu soundlessly burnt up.

Having won by default, Izayoi's lips were twitching and he stared angrily at Saurian Demon King.

"Hey, you crappy snake… what the hell did you mean by that?"

"Let's put aside this battle for now. Our fight has already deviated from the focus of this game anyways. It wouldn't matter who won, nor would it be interesting. So I would like to postpone this battle to another time we meet in a game."

Kouryuu gave his suspicious smile before turning his back on Izayoi.

But Izayoi's questions had not ended.

"…Then the matter about going to see [Great Sage Equalling Heavens] is also to be left like that?"

"Hey wait now…. Wasn't it you who said it? If I had gone to meet her with this look now……I would be a disappointment for her right?"

To meet the person he respected with his head held high.

Having found the answer to his own road, Kouryuu stood at the top of the waterfall ledge.

"Bye lad. Let's meet next time…. With me using the [Authority of the Host Master] to be your opponent."

Kouryuu gave a smile as he leapt from the waterfall's ledge.

The domineering spirit fully restored, it was the first time that Kouryuu looked this alive and refreshed in many hundred years.

Part 9

--- [Underwood], a distance away from the flood gates.

At the end point of the race, [Underwood] flood gates, a crowd had grown to fill the whole area as the audiences awaited to welcome the victor. And those two contestants that were competing for the final stretch were the most highly chosen choice for the bets and was naturally the reason for holding the audiences' attention for so long.

Who would be the first to reach and claim the top place? The audiences were holding their breaths as they continued to watch the race intensely.

Waiting in front of the flood gates, Kuro Usagi happily announced when she saw two figures that were furiously churning water sprays in the distance.

"Everyone! The contestants have appeared and taking the lead is [Will-O'-Wisp]'s Faceless! Coming in close behind is [No Name] Kudou Asuka! The supporter, Kasukabe Yō is still in play as well!"

Hearing Kuro Usagi's commentary, Ayesha and Jack also cheered:

"Yay! Just rush to the end point in a breath to claim an overwhelming victory, Faceless!"

"Yahohoho! Just a few steps more!"

Both of them waved the flag of [Will-O'-Wisp] while shouting their encouragements.

Even Lily who was vending the portable snack booth was not to be outdone by them.

"Asuka-sama! Yō-sama! Gambatte!" Lily used her all to wave her hands and her two tails as she continued to shout encouragements.

Whereas Percher and Leticia who stood beside Lily were assessing the situation seriously.

"Asuka's situation seem quite precarious."

"Nn. I see that she's maintaining a certain distance from her opponent and that should be the attack radius of Faceless……"

"If she wants to get pass, she'd better be mentally prepared to have her swimsuit stripped……Ehehe, the games of Little Garden are quite indecent."

To be unable to respond with a "No, there's no such thing." should also be a sad thing to note about the conversation.

But from Percher's point of view, whether Asuka lost the race or get herself stripped, either scenario would be ideal material to tease Asuka.

Being a bystander in this situation, she showed a victorious smile as she watched the race in a relaxed manner.

Having followed the original plan and arriving at the straight lane, Asuka and Yō steeled their resolves, to initiate the plan of their last battle.

"Be it life or death, it all comes to this now!"

"No Asuka, that's not right. You only have victory or getting stripped as the options."

"If I get stripped, I would rather die!"

Asuka shouted in despair. It would seem that she had set her determination about that.

Yō pondered over the newly added burden to the task before accelerating.

"No worries, I will never let Asuka… be stripped…"

Sparkling with the light of the Pegasus and surrounded by the whirlwinds of the Gryphon, Yō started the assault on Faceless.

Faceless did not even turn her head when Yō entered her whip sword attack radius but she still managed to target Yō's swimsuit as she launched the attack. Could it be that she could detect anything that came within her attack radius just by judging the presence of her opponent? That really made her out to be more like a monster than she already was.

As they were still a distance apart, Yō successfully dodged the blade but knew that she wouldn't be that lucky next time if she got any closer.

Up against the spectacular sword skills of her opponent---Kasukabe Yō made mental preparations for getting stripped.

"Asuka! Go!"

"Got it! Zipopo-san, let's give our all for the last stretch---!"

The Hippocamp gave a magnificent neigh as it shot forward. After countless escapes from dangerous situations, his strength was almost at its limit. This was truly the last defense line to breach.

Faceless wanted to use her whip sword to attack Asuka who was gaining on them from the left but her attack was thwarted by Yō's shining whirlwind defenses that stood in her way.

If it were a normal blade, it would have been able to cut through the whirlwinds. However, the whip sword had more similarities to a whip and was of a soft blade tip that could be redirected in its trajectory by the control of whirlwinds.

Immediately analyzing the situation, Faceless aimed for the point where Yō would not be able to move away from to land her next attack.

"…I see it now. So accept my slash."

Using her Gift card to switch weapons, she targeted Asuka who was fast closing the distance behind her and wielded her Steel spears.

"Asuka! Watch out!"

Just as Asuka was about to get hit, the Pegasus armor suddenly blocked her view of Faceless. And Yō having taken the hit for her lost her balance from the impact.

(Heavy…what a heavy impact!)

Even with the use of her Titan enhanced strength and the sparkling whirlwinds from the Gryphon and Pegasus abilities combined, she barely managed to defend the hacking blow. But Faceless herself didn't seem to be affected at all as she continued with her second strike.

To be able to fight on par with her strength would require at least the Kirin's Lance or a weapon of that level. But if I were to release the defenses of the Pegasus, there would be no way for me to catch up to her speed…

Yō clenched her teeth in thought as she was troubled with the choices that didn't seem very viable.

---She was indeed a strong opponent. But I cannot lose as well.

"Asuka……I'm leaving the rest to you!"

She had agreed to help Asuka block for ten rounds. So at least for the ten rounds that was had just started, she cannot afford to lose.

Condensing her energy in her leg guards, Yō decided to go on the offensive as she rushed towards Faceless. Having thought of the spear's characteristics, she had deemed close quarter combat to be the safest.

Faceless immediately dropped a spear to change to close combat tactics. But to deal with an opponent in flight while the steed continued to travel in a predictable straight line was very tricky indeed.

Seeing how her battle tactics seem effective, Yō hurriedly grabbed the chance to try land a consecutive chain of attacks.

(As long as I can delay her! It will work…)

Asuka had already sped past Faceless and was leading by a little. Since Asuka's speed was much faster, it would be safe as long as Asuka got out of the attack radius that would have stripped her otherwise.

However, that relaxed thought spelt defeat for her.

"---You are too naïve, Miss Kasukabe."

Her chained attack of kicks with her Pegasus leg guards were stopped. This was because Faceless had thrown away her spear and used her hands to make a successful grab at Yō's legs.

"No…No way!"

"It was a very nice match. If there's a chance, let's fight again next time."

Faceless used her monotonous voice to praise before pulling Yō down onto the river surface. With her out of the game, there was no one to protect Asuka now.

All the [No Name] members that were watching from afar shivered upon the realization.

"If this continues…Asuka will be stripped!"

"Run Quickly! Asuka-sama!"

Leticia and Lily's desperate shouts could be heard from the Audience Stands.

Faceless summoned her Serpens Scorpius Sword and let fly the blade towards Asuka's swimsuit---

"---Burn it to crisp! That shameless sword!---"

The swimsuit was intact.

While the flames released by Asuka melted the metal off the Serpens Scorpius Sword.

"This……"

"Oh, it seems like you have fallen for it! Even without needing to see the blade tip, as long as I know that you will [aim at the swimsuit], I can naturally set a trap for you in advance!"

Asuka loudly proclaim her victory. This was her last resort.

There were a total of five gemstones on her gauntlet which she removed and hid in her swimsuit. Waiting for the moment that the blade tip comes into contact, the power of the gems activated to release the heat to melt the opponent's sword. Since the limitation of the Gift was that it required contact to have its most effective result, she had kept that as the last card up her sleeve.

"Hu…"

Faceless threw away the burnt whip sword and tried to urge her steed forward with all her riding skills in full play. And though she might have a high level skill in riding horses, the fate of the race had been sealed.

"I see that you have enjoyed yourself! Masked Rider-sama! [Hippocamp Riders] ….is our win!"

Asuka won the final gamble and she announced in her joyous mood.

A deafening cheer erupted throughout [Underwood] as the residents welcomed the first rider to reach the end point.

Kuro Usagi had also left her job as the commentator and jumped towards Asuka.

"Asuka-san, Congratulations on the victory!"

"Wa…Wait! Kuro Usagi!"

"Kya!" Asuka gave a cry of surprise as both of them fell into the water with a big splash.

The audience at the flood gates also began to laugh at that ridiculous sight.

Smiling while observing the commotion, Shiroyasha clapped her hand forcefully to attract everyone's attention.

"I hereby announce that the first place of [Hippocamp Riders] goes to Asuka of [No Name] and her comrades! Come now, Carry the winner up onto the stage! We will soon commence the ceremony of the Gift inheritance as well as the second half of the banquet!"

Leading the crowd to congratulate the winner, the audience also cheered.

Grabbing Kuro Usagi's shoulder, Asuka muttered in a daze:

"….still going to eat?"

"It's the harvest festival after all. Ehehe. Kuro Usagi will also display her skills tonight! To make up for the previous failure!"

"NnNn!" Kuro Usagi encouraged herself.

At this moment, Asuka suddenly gave Kuro Usagi a tight hug.

"……thank you for all those times, Kuro Usagi."

"Eh?"

"Ehehe, nothing."

Asuka smiled as she got back up onto the saddle with Kuro Usagi riding behind her.

Cheers continued to pour from the sides as they travelled along the road to the Underground city of Underwood.

Epilogue

Part 1

---[Underwood] Ceremony for [Floor Master]'s assumption to office.

On the last night of the Harvest festival, the whole plaza was in an atmosphere of seriousness as the banquet that had continued for days on end was also paused for the event that was taking place at the top of the Great Tree.

The Protector of the South, Sala Doltrake had been appointed as the next [Floor Master] and was receiving the [Horn of Draco Greif].

Watching the ceremony from the plaza of the Underground City, Izayoi and the others were drinking Spotted Pear Juice while reminiscing about the days they had in the Harvest Festival.

"With this, the [Draco Greif] Alliance would be much more peaceful."

"Yes~Griffith have also left after the game and there isn't any more dissent that can be heard from the Alliance."

Kuro Usagi replied to Izayoi's comment. Griffith had left his Community after the confirmation that Sala was to be assuming office for the position of [Floor Master]. Though it wasn't known whether it was a stand-offish act or a simple acceptance of defeat, it was still a battle that he had gambled on for the position of [Floor Master] which had the condition of making the loser abandon their leadership post. Hence it wasn't that surprising for the other members of [Two Wings] to accept the reality as well.

Asuka and Yō who were drinking Spotted Pear juice beside Izayoi had also seemed to have the burden lifted off their shoulders as a relaxed smile appeared on their faces.

“Sala shouldn’t have any problem now that she has the [DracoGriff Horn] to replace her broken one right?”

“That horn was the dragon horn of Draco Greif and hence there was only one horn. I heard that Shiroyasha will also present other Gifts for her assumption to office, so there’s no need to worry.”

“I see…”Asuka said.

Not long after, a violent gust of hot air eddied around the top of the Great Tree and was gradually spreading outwards.

The hot winds tore through the Underground city below and dispersed the creeping chills of the cold night air. Seeming to realize that this was the moment that the new [Floor Master] had assumed office, the city was filled with the light melodious clinking of glasses as they made a toast to it.

Kuro Usagi gazed at the Underwood around her while muttering her heartfelt blessings and envy.

“…Sala-sama, thank you for your hard work. Kuro Usagi and her comrades will also work hard and not lose out to you.”

Carrying the fate of the Community, contributing to the revival of the City and having her accomplishments acknowledged.

From Kuro Usagi's perspective, these were not unrelated to herself. Having supported and held on to the [No Name] Community when it was destroyed, this example of a revival was definitely a heartening achievement.

([No Name] will someday…be able to proudly fly our flag above our Community…..Canaria-sama!)

Someday they would retrieve their stolen flag, name and meet up with their former comrades.

Kuro Usagi held that dream in her heart as she looked up at the flag hanging on the Great Tree.

Choosing this moment, Lily and the Senior group of children, who were waiting nearby for an opportunity, ran over to her.

"Kuro Usagi Onee-san……"

"……Lily? Is something the matter?"

Kuro Usagi tilted her head as she observed Lily who was acting suspiciously.

Lily's fox ears were red as she passed the little bag she had hugged just moments before to Kuro Usagi.

"This is….?"

"A present for you. It was chosen by Izayoi-sama, Asuka-sama, Yō-sama, Jin Bo-chan and us for you."

"---Eh?" Surprised, Kuro Usagi 's ears were perked up.

Casting a questioning look to those three, the three problem kids nodded in affirmation though they turned their gazes elsewhere, plainly refusing to look at Kuro Usagi when they did so.

"……Nn. You did summon us to this kind of interesting place after all."

"And we managed to form an Alliance which counts as a milestone and a reason for us to celebrate."

"Thank you for all the times you've looked out for us Kuro Usagi."

Yō ended it with a big smile on her face while Izayoi and Asuka plainly didn't want to show their face to Kuro Usagi.

Though their concern for her was clumsy, their thoughts were still able to evoke feelings of happiness in Kuro Usagi.

"Th…Thank You. Kuro Usagi will treasure it…!"



While she said it, Kuro Usagi's fingers were about to open the little bag when the three problem kids grabbed her on each side, stopping her from opening the package.

"Okay. There's still time to open the present later."

"It's the last night of the Harvest Festival already! Of course we should have our fill of the food and drinks!"

"Kuro Usagi, let's go!"

"Eh? Wa…Wait a moment!~"

The present pushed into Lily's hands, the four of them had sped off towards the centre of the plaza.

Lily took a glance inside the little package and spotted that there was a letter besides the present that they had chosen.

And this was written for the recipient region:

To our dear comrade---Kuro Usagi.

"---Hehe, Izayoi–sama and the others sure aren't honest enough about it."

[To our dear comrade]. These words made Lily wag her two tails happily.

The Senior group of children had also followed the lead of those four in high spirits.

Enveloped by the drafts of cool night air and well-wishes to the new [Floor Master], the residents of the Underground City weren't planning to sleep tonight as their toasts and merriment continued to echo for a long time.

Part 2

---[Underwood]'s Best VIP Guest room.

Standing in the room that was smoky with the burning of incense sticks, Shiroyasha gazed up at the moon.

The ceremony of presenting the Gift and the title of [Floor Master] to Sala had come to an end not too long ago.

But for Shiroyasha, she still had two more important tasks that were urgent and not completed yet.

Having won the Game of [Hippocamp Riders], the [No Name]s were entitled to receive a Gift from Shiroyasha.

However, it wasn't a Gift that they were looking for---they wished for [Gry the Gryphon to be a Guest comrade in their Community].

"That was the Gift that Izayoi had asked for……the rest will be up to you, Gry."

A piece of Geass Roll fluttered lightly to the floor. And the contents inscribed on it were:

[The loss of the wings from [Thousand Eyes] member, Gry, is due to us of [No Name]. Hence, we would like to take him in for the period of time that he needs to recuperate.]

Gry had read the beautifully handwritten Geass Roll with thoughts of accepting his fate.

---Just a few days ago, he had judged himself to be unfit to participate in any Games in the future.

Having lost his wings was but one of the reasons……But the most important reason was still the fact that he had lost his partner in flight.

The consecutive losses of his partner and his wings gravely wounded his pride and he was sure that no one would want to ride on him to battle anymore. At least that was the feelings he had before he read this document.

(……Looks like that lad really plans to keep his words from that time…)

Even though he had already mentally prepared himself even before he suffered the fresher wounds, that guy did not seem to have given up on him. The nobility of that man caused Gry's battle scarred heart to be ablaze with the passion to fight on.

Closing his eyes to give it a clearer thought, he soon worked up the determination as he bowed to Shioyasha.

"Shiroyasha-sama. You've accepted me when I was sent out from my homeland. I will not forget the kindness that you've shown to me, ever. But, I ……"

"It's okay. I permit you to leave. I will send a letter to them to prepare a welcome for their new comrade. You can help add to the strength of that new wind which blows in the East Side."

Shiroyasha gave him a nod as she smiled knowingly.

Obtaining the understanding of the master that he had served under for ten years, caused tears to well up from the rims of Gry's eyes.

"……To me, [Thousand Eyes] will always be the homeland of my heart. If something arises, please call for me. I swear that I will rush to your aid no matter the obstacles that try to stand in my way."

“Nn. I’ve received your oath……Oh well, just count this as your pension sum from me---No, it should be said as for your reserve funds. Here, just accept it.”

Tracing a ring in the air with her finger, Shiroyasha transformed the smoky trail into a golden ring that she fastened to Gry’s talon.

“This is?”

“Kekeke. It’s a tool that Humans need in their daily lives. Just take it as a Gift to acknowledge your achievements and hard work. You can use it later when you return to your room. It’s quite a valuable item so please treasure it.”

“Yes, I will. I’m deeply indebted and thankful.”

Gry bowed respectfully and left Shiroyasha’s room after saying his farewells.

“……Heheh, watching youngsters leave on a new journey really is a pleasant feeling.”

Shiroyasha who was alone in her room lighted up her pipe.

After a few breaths of the incense and her pipe, Shiroyasha spoke to the person outside her window.

“Hey, Kouryuu. How long are you planning to stand out there? Get yourself in here now.”

“Oh, I was found out?”

Kouryuu feinted surprise as he replied and entered from the window with a leap.

A strong gust of night breeze blew in as he did so and the incense smoke was blown out of the room. Shiroyasha immediately rounded on him with fire in her eyes for that was her favorite incense.

“Hey! Can’t you come in through the front door proper?”

“Oh~but with Draco’s son around, it wasn’t convenient for me to come in through the front……but that child seems to have grown to resemble his dad.”

“Yea. If it were possible, I would really wish that he and Griffith could patch up……”

“That would be poking your nose where it shouldn’t belong. For siblings to patch up their relationship, it would require the siblings themselves to be willing.”

Kouryuu laughed heartily. Hearing a subtle meaning in his words, Shiroyasha raised an eyebrow as she asked:

“……Don’t you want to resume your relations with your sister?”

Shiroyasha’s question wiped the smile off Kouryuu’s face.

Kouryuu gazed up at the moon outside the window and seemed to be talking to himself:

“…… That lad from [No Name] asked me this question: What sort of face would you want to bring before your Onee-san? Those words were damn right. Pretending to be a recluse when I’m just a useless person who wanders around. What kind of face do I have to bring before her?”

“……”

"If it were the current me, nothing would change even if I went to meet her. I still don't have the achievements to hold my head high when I meet her again. If it causes her to be angry with me, it would still be bearable……but I'm afraid that she would cry upon seeing my current self."

Besides worrying about being a disappointment to the other, he was more worried about causing grief.

And it was with that thought in mind that he found the courage to stand up again.

Shiroyasha closed her eyes seemingly in deep thought but she was thanking Izayoi in her heart.

(Successfully relighting the flames of ambition in the 'Withered floating log'?……That guy sure is impressive.)

Not waiting for Kouryuu to continue his words, Shiroyasha quickly got to her feet and took a goatskin parchment from the bookshelves to show it to him.

"Kouryuu. If you really want to have some achievements to talk about, I've got just the right and important task for you."

"I knew it. That's why I had waited outside the room…… its regarding the return of your [Divinity] to Heaven right?"

"Nn. For the days to come, my actions in the public will be under much restrictions. For that time period, the East would lose its [Floor Master]. So, could you…help be my replacement and protect the East Side for me?"

The goatskin parchment that Shiroyasha had passed to him was the proof of a [Floor Master]---the [Authority of a Host Master].

Sweeping his eyes across the inscribed contents, Kouryuu tilted his head and gave a wry smile.

“I’m really thankful for you thinking so highly of me, but it’s just that I do not have much leadership qualities.”

“Nothing of that sort that you need to worry about. I will just appoint you as a VIP guest member of [Thousand Eyes]. If that’s not enough, I can also lend you a portion of the Suns Authorities. That should be more than enough right?”

At that, Kouryuu’s eye couldn’t help but become wide and round.

It wasn’t the problem about needing more or less power but the fact that to have someone treated as a VIP guest member all of a sudden was an unprecedented preferential treatment.

“That…That really flatters me a lot but your opinion of me too high?”

“No. In fact, I judge that I should at least go to that extent. The Demon Lord Alliance is still an unknown number and I predict that their total battle strength to be at least a fourth level or even hitting the third level. And it isn’t time for me to hold back on lending strength. Since the lower levels have a lot of Communities that are worth nurturing.”

Shiroyasha’s words had been serious but when nearing the end, the corners of her lips twitched up into a smile. Kouryuu also nodded his head in agreement.

“About that, I would agree sharing the same sentiments. The lower levels do have a lot of interesting things, including the [No Name].”

“So, does that mean you will accept?”

"Yes. I'm willing to take on the responsibilities of a Stand-in [Floor Master]."

Kouryuu firmly shook Shiroyasha's extended hand.

The one who stood in this place wasn't the man who was once called a 'Withered Floating Log' anymore.

At this very moment, his body was emitting a strong and unyielding domineering spirit comparable to the days when he, Saurian Demon King had fought against the numerous and famous demigods and deities.

"Good! I will leave the handing over procedures to my Shop assistant to guide you along. If you have any queries, just ask her for I'm leaving right now."

"What's the rush?"

"According to the information that Bull Demon King had provided, there's already one Demon Lord of the Demon Lord Alliance who's been identified for sure. And he's a very tricky fellow to deal with. I must take the opportunity to give that Demon Lord a warning before I'm totally restricted."

Kouryuu's iris that had narrowed to a slit was giving off a glint as he asked:

"……Which Demon Lord is that? Is he famous?"

Shiroyasha's face had turned all serious and a little anxious as she cut to the point with the mentioning of the name.

"His name is ---[Maxwell Demon Lord], a demon lord that controls portals."